

**Cultural Identity for Urban Aboriginal Peoples
Learning Circles Synthesis Report**

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Paper prepared as part of the
Research Program of the
Royal Commission
on Aboriginal Peoples

December 1994

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Executive Summary

Throughout the community hearings conducted by the Royal Commission, countless speakers referred to the fundamental importance of their cultural, or Aboriginal, identity. As well, many of the youths who made presentations to the Commission stated that they felt they had lost touch with or did not understand their cultural identity. Given these statements, this project began with the assumption that it is highly important at this time to cultivate a clear understanding of Aboriginal cultural identity, as it has an impact on many other issues of spiritual, social and political significance for Aboriginal people (e.g., self-determination, self-governance, land rights, membership). With this in mind the Commission's urban perspectives research team devised a project involving cultural identity learning circles and case studies to clarify exactly what cultural identity consists of for Aboriginal people, how it is diminished or enhanced, and what role it plays in the participants' daily lives.

Given the stated objectives of the study, the research team devised a focus group format to obtain the required information. The groups became known as learning circles and consisted of twelve participants and two facilitators (on average). Each circle was conducted over a two-day period using a structured format of questions and activities that sought to discover the core elements of cultural identity in the present, the past as it relates to cultural identity, the factors that weaken or diminish cultural identity, and the empowering forces that strengthen or support cultural identity. At the end of the two days each group offered a number of recommendations for the support of Aboriginal identity in Canada.

In all, 10 groups were conducted at 6 locations around the country: 2 in Victoria (artists and Métis), 2 in Inuvik (Inuvialuit youth and adults), 1 in Saskatoon (treaty First Nations people), 2 in Winnipeg (inmates and Métis), 1 in Quebec City (professional service providers), and 2 in Halifax (women and elders). These locations were chosen to give regional variation to the study. Further, individual participants were chosen in attempt to represent a strong cross-section of Aboriginal people by focusing on different groups (such as artists or inmates, for example), a gender mix, age, status/non-status and tribal affiliation, as well as a mix of First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations. In the end our sample included a broad representation of Aboriginal people from all regions of Canada.

The 10 sessions were videotaped; the tapes, in addition to the facilitators' written notes and records, became the raw data. The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively for dominant themes. For the qualitative report the team viewed all the tapes and written accounts to create a written description of each of the groups and an overall analysis of the dominant themes that arose in individual groups and across groups. In the final report only three of the group descriptions were included; including all ten would have made the document long and repetitive, as there were many commonalities between groups. The other seven descriptive analyses are available for those who wish to read them.

In general, modern Aboriginal identity — whether rural or urban — has at its core the profound impact of colonial assimilation strategies. In addition, it is evident from the research of the urban perspectives team that cultural identity is very personal and extremely complex. In our discussions with urban people, the themes they identified when speaking about their cultural identity included family, spirituality, community, land, government, residential school, youth, language, women, elders, politics, self-determination, organizations, education, healing, colonization and racism. All these themes are interrelated to varying degrees, depending on the individual whose life they refer to; none can be examined in isolation, all are interdependent and integral to the make-up of urban cultural identity. When we set out to understand and describe identity we have to build constructs that are inclusive of all, or we may contribute to a subtle form of 'ethnic cleansing' by defining narrowly who is and who is not a part of the community of Aboriginal people. Clearly there is a spectrum of identity alternatives: at one end are the traditionalists who choose to live their lives guided by traditional Aboriginal values and practices. At the other end of the spectrum are people who have assimilated significantly into mainstream society and experience little tension or anxiety about their lives. In the middle there are essentially two groups. First, there are those who are uncertain or confused about their identity and how they can integrate the best of both cultures. These people experience great anxiety and tension over their identity — some to the point of self-destruction — as they are in a constant state of transition and change. Second, some have integrated successfully parts of their traditional Aboriginal culture with aspects of modern mainstream society to create a bi-cultural identity. These categories are not finite, and some people may move between them. But across the spectrum, except perhaps for people who have significantly assimilated (of whom we talked to very few), a majority of the people are loyal to their Aboriginal identity and wish to continue

to develop, explore and express it.

Some of the core elements of identity found in this study include the fundamental nature of spirituality and one's relationship to the Creator; a relationship to the land and nature; strong extended family ties; a significant bond with a specific place or home community; a viable livelihood; a shared experience of oppression and suffering (with all Aboriginal people around the world) resulting from colonization and racism; some degree of tension (varying from occasional and barely perceptible to very high and potentially destructive, depending on the individual) between mainstream society and the expression of their Aboriginal identity — for example, in employment or with respect to government institutions; reclaiming traditional language, ceremony, regalia, stories, songs, dances, rituals, arts and other skills; harvesting and preparation of foods; distinct values and beliefs; healing from despair and rage fuelled by racist victimization and expressed symptomatically through addictions, family violence and self-destruction in Aboriginal communities; employment; political activity and organizing. This list is general and is not all-encompassing, because identity is a personal matter and the range of diversity is extremely broad.

There are also factors that enhance or strengthen identity as well as factors that diminish, weaken or deny the expression of identity in the urban setting. Many people stated that gatherings of a cultural or educational nature were often highly supportive of their identity; for example, elders' gatherings, healing circles, pow wows and other celebrations were often identified in a very positive light. Education that was authentic and offered an accurate, critical account of colonization and Aboriginal history was unanimously considered to strengthen identity. Further, media that expressed a realistic, accurate and positive image of Aboriginal people was something that people across the country identified as enhancing their identity. Urban service agencies that are able to create an anti-racist environment and promote respect and awareness for the unique concerns of Aboriginal people are also valued for their ability to strengthen identity.

In contrast there are also many factors that diminish or weaken identity. Racism is one of the most pervasive forces weakening or denying aspects of identity for urban dwellers; people identified racism socially, in various government institutions (education, social services, health, justice), in employment, in the media, when they seek housing and in many other facets of their lives. Regardless of where they experience it, racism is always extremely destructive. The

omission of Aboriginal reality — from the media, from education curricula, from government service delivery — is an intangible yet profoundly crippling form of identity denial that has invalidated generations of Aboriginal people and has served to suppress the development and expression of their identity. Lack of access to resources — such as elders, spiritual people, Aboriginal counsellors, cultural gatherings, traditional teachers and other important supports for cultural learning — is another major barrier to the continuing exploration and development of identity that is specific to urban people.

These examples of factors that diminish and those that enhance identity are only a sample of those expressed by urban people. In the end policy makers must be aware that in the large urban centres these phenomena are have potentially more influence on identity because urban people are in cultural isolation; they are a relatively small cultural minority and there is very little in their surroundings that reflects their Aboriginal ancestry. Language, ceremony, spirituality, ritual, value systems, beliefs, celebrations and many other facets of life that may be part of daily life in an isolated rural community have less opportunity to thrive in the city. Identity is potentially vulnerable in this atmosphere unless people consciously create an environment that reflects their reality. The creation of such a supportive environment is something that concerns all of us. It is a long-term process that calls on both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people to unlearn old racist and colonial attitudes that have kept them both in a dehumanized state of existence.

Recommendations

1. Self-Determination

1a. We, as distinct sovereign nations, assert recognition of our inherent right of self-determination with the required legislative authority to exercise control over our own institutions and resources, for example, lands, education, natural resources, employment, health, housing, economic development, family and child welfare services. All of these institutions would be guided by the dictates of the cultural traditions and practices of each self-determining nation. Further, the inherent right of self-government for Aboriginal peoples must be recognized in the Canadian constitution and guided by the spirit and intent of the treaties, through a harmonious working relationship of all nations, including federal, provincial and local governments.

1b. That the existing treaties between Canada and the First Nations be acknowledged and honoured and Aboriginal peoples duly compensated for the fact that the Canadian government has been unable to fulfil the fiduciary obligations spelled out by the treaties.

1c. That Aboriginal nations be recognized as the rightful authority on issues of membership within their own nations.

1d. That Aboriginal people be guaranteed the right to practise their cultural and spiritual traditions to the fullest capacity regardless of where they are.

1e. Until self-governing mechanisms are in place, that an interim political body representing the concerns of all Aboriginal people be formed to advocate at the provincial and federal levels of government.

2. Land

2a. That equitable and swift settlements be reached with respect to outstanding land claims issues.

2b. That better and more flexible mechanisms to settle land claims be developed immediately.

2c. That urban land bases be established for Aboriginal communities to exercise greater autonomy within the urban environment.

2d. That a process be instituted whereby urban people can exercise their treaty rights and land rights. And for those people who have no official land base, that a process be instituted to help them gain access to some form of liveable and resourceable land.

3. Legislation and Human Rights

3a. That, until self-governing institutions are in place, all rights, resources and benefits pertaining to people living on *Indian Act* reserves be granted equally to those living off-reserve; this should apply to all Aboriginal people. Effectively this recommendation would see the end of the distinction between on-reserve and off-reserve rights and privileges.

3b. That the federal and provincial human rights agencies clarify their jurisdictions with respect to Aboriginal people so that human rights abuses with respect to Aboriginal people can be dealt with in a clear and consistent manner. Further, this initiative should include the development of support and encouragement for Aboriginal people to report human rights

violations to the appropriate agency; this initiative could begin with a simple handbook that explains the procedure.

3c. That a protective mechanism such as an office or legal agency of Aboriginal peoples be created and developed, by Aboriginal people, to ensure all legislation being passed by Parliament in no way infringes on the rights of Aboriginal people. Additionally, this agency would include a forum to inform Aboriginal people of all laws and decisions (made by government and/or business) that affect, for example, their lands and resources, their livelihood, their rights or their communities.

3d. Urban people who are estranged personally and culturally from their communities are often ignorant of their Aboriginal rights. An agency should be established that works to inform them of their rights and assists them to navigate the red tape involved in asserting the rights they have.

4. Education and Cultural Renewal

4a. That qualified Aboriginal elders, educators, writers, historians, artists and academics rewrite our history accurately, integrating information from oral histories, storytelling, memories, dreams, visions, elders' life histories, tribal languages, customs, traditions and culture. This accurate historical information should first be available to Aboriginal children, families, communities and nations. This information should also be recorded in textbooks and reference materials such as audio-visual recordings and written information. Further, the information could then be distributed for use at all levels of the education system, from preschool to post-graduate. To this end governments and media institutions must also use this information to promote an accurate image of Aboriginal people in order to counteract old stereotypes. In the place of stereotypes this history would contain information such as the contributions of Aboriginal people and the historical destruction of their society and territory through colonization.

4b. That Aboriginal schools be created in urban centres for Aboriginal children and youth. These schools would reflect an Aboriginal context and would incorporate authentic culture, language, curriculum, activities, arts, music and spirituality. And that students have the choice of attending an Aboriginal separate school system, without the stigma of deviant, special needs, or drop-out. This ought to be a place to excel in a culturally rich milieu, with components that help students learn about their heritage and learn to leave unhealthy patterns behind.

4c. That multifaceted Aboriginal cultural centres be established in urban settings. These centres would be a place for people to learn, a resource for cultural renewal, and a meeting place for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The location of the centres would be central, accessible and safe for everyone who wishes to use them. Further, Aboriginal elders should be used throughout the development and in the daily activities and programs of the centres where possible. Also language programs that reflect the surrounding regional Aboriginal nations could be offered. As well, traditional circles of spiritual healing, teaching and learning would be promoted and used within the centres. Using the resources of the centres, Aboriginal people would compile, promote, distribute and preserve elders' life histories, storytelling, visions and dreams on audio-visual and written records. A library/archival resource centre that includes local historical events from an Aboriginal perspective would also be part of these cultural and learning institutions. There could also be instruction in craft techniques for the maintenance and promotion of age-old cultural/traditional skills — open to all ages. Included in the centres would be daycare and meeting rooms to meet the needs of the urban Aboriginal community as well as a gift shop that promotes and sells Aboriginal crafts, books, records, tapes, and art to the general public. Finally, Aboriginal people would be employed throughout the conception, development, design, construction and operation of the centres.

4d. The establishment and implementation of a national Aboriginal resource network system and centre for the collection, housing, distribution and networking of culturally-based information controlled by and for Aboriginal peoples. An archive and resource centre of this sort could use computer technology to link with regional centres or communities all over the country to help them gain access to important cultural information.

4e. That Aboriginal educators design, develop and implement culturally relevant curriculum and programs for use in all education systems.

4f. That Aboriginal people who want to learn their language be given the opportunity to learn and pass it on to future generations. Further, Aboriginal languages should be mandatory at elementary levels and optional in secondary school systems. Lastly, resources should be made available for the continuing development of Aboriginal languages, by elders and resource people, in order to derive new terminology that reflects modern technology and cultural changes.

4g. That more Aboriginal educators be recruited, trained and hired in mainstream education institutions, and that localized training programs be established to prepare and

encourage Aboriginal people to pursue professional career paths (such as social workers, counsellors, economic development officers, community developers, lawyers, accountants, engineers, administrators, managers) that will benefit their communities and advance the process of self-determination.

4h. That a restructured traditional parenting program be developed and implemented to address the systematic destruction and disintegration of the traditional family by assimilationist policies such as residential schools and the child welfare system, legislated by federal and provincial governments. This program would also incorporate components that deal with decolonization, internalized colonization and racism and cultural revitalization.

5. Youth

5a. That Aboriginal youth centres be established with culturally appropriate activities and programs that promote fun and teach cultural values and traditions. Specific areas of learning could include outdoor education and survival, traditional cultural practices, history and art.

5b. That multi-disciplinary education programs be developed that use elders, artists, leaders, ex-inmates, teachers and other significant community resource people as voices of experience to address the concerns and issues of Aboriginal youth. These programs could be portable and used in educational settings such as Aboriginal youth centres, schools and community centres. These programs should include a critical history, validating and making visible our reality and addressing decolonization — externally and internally.

5c. That the human services education of provincial social workers reflect the work they do with Aboriginal people in urban centres. Decolonization, anti-racism, and cultural awareness must be a mandatory part of curricula.

5d. That the removal of children from Aboriginal families be inextricably linked to culturally based services, treatment and quick recovery of the family unit. That existing urban Aboriginal organizations and services be mandated and funded to provide child welfare services.

5e. That urban Aboriginal child welfare services be instituted and sufficiently funded. That legislation be drafted to begin transfer of authority initiatives in urban centres.

5f. That more stringent screening and training for foster and adoptive parents be implemented in child protection legislation, as it is critical to the welfare of Aboriginal children who become absorbed by the non-Aboriginal child welfare system. Too many children in care

are sexually, emotionally, racially or culturally abused. And that more Aboriginal foster parents be trained and used by Aboriginal child and youth services.

6. Elders

6a. The establishment of safe, healthy and secure urban residential environments for elders that promote culturally appropriate activities with adequate resources and facilities to do so, including proper medical support systems.

6b. That Aboriginal elders be recognized for their role as teachers and storehouses of vital information about Aboriginal traditions and how they can be applied to modern circumstances. Elders can help infuse spiritual integrity into the urban community because it is culture and tradition that feed the spirit, that form aesthetic and creative expression, encourage altruism, and teach respect and connection to the earth and creation, as well as respect for elders, self and life. In essence, the cultural understandings that elders hold must be valued and used at every opportunity to enhance and strengthen identity.

7. Women

7a. That information on sexism, racism, classism, ageism, homophobia and other socially constructed inequities be topics of learning for society in general, and particularly in relation to social service professionals, reserve populations, impoverished populations, professional educators and the personnel and leadership of Aboriginal organizations, both rural and urban. The experiences of Aboriginal women need to be reflected in this information, as these biases and attitudes create horrendous living conditions for women both on- and off-reserve and must be addressed to produce real change.

7b. That women elders and grandmothers be given resources to form organizations that provide urban women with culturally appropriate medicines, services, counsellors, mentors, spiritual guides and women's teachings. These women must be made accessible to urban women and children, and their contribution must be recognized as legitimate and valuable through the establishment of a gathering and meeting place — for example, a grandmothers lodge for learning and teaching. And that this agency or organization be given financial resources to promote healing and wellness among Aboriginal women.

7c. That Aboriginal midwives be recognized for their expertise and contribution in

pregnancy and childbirth. That our natural teachers and helpers be reinstated so that they can reclaim their natural roles and responsibilities among other women.

7d. That healing centres meet the specific needs of urban women. They must incorporate programs that are capable of dealing with a multitude of issues, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, family violence, addictions, prostitution, child abuse and neglect, poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia and alienation from home communities. That is, the staff must be trained and educated in areas of sexism, patriarchal domination, racism, decolonization and forced migration and be able to reframe the symptoms that urban women cope and live with on a daily basis. That these centres incorporate appropriate support services such as child care, after care and follow up.

7e. That an agency or organization develop services to inform and educate women on their rights, both off- and on-reserve. This would include helping them obtain information about their treaty, land, band and tribal rights. Women must have equal opportunity of access to their own entitlements.

7f. That Aboriginal women's political marginalization be recognized and that a process be established to begin to remove barriers to women's full participation in the political arena. Their concerns and voices must be expressed to represent their distinct issues authentically. This process would necessarily begin to address the male domination of political activities — in reserve communities and urban centres.

7g. That a process be established to address the gross inequities facing urban women who have lost their land base as a result of being forced to leave their reserve communities (while men maintained their land base throughout) after losing Aboriginal status under the *Indian Act*. This process must also address continued discrimination against women (under section 12 1(b) and later Bill C-31) and their offspring who are still in jeopardy of losing their treaty rights and land entitlement. Despite reinstatement of status through Bill C-31, sufficient land and resources have not been allotted to meet the needs of people wishing to return to their communities. The result has been great community and family conflict and tension over land and resources. This process must begin to account for the initial flaws of Bill C-31 and the discrimination against women that continues today.

7h. Also so that women who flee from abusive relationships do not have to live in high-crime, ghettoized areas where their children become victimized and where services are

minimal at best — that sufficient emergency resources, including transitional housing, transportation, clothing, food and money, be available to them.

8. Healing

8a. Aboriginal people demand acknowledgement — by governments, churches and any other agencies involved with the establishment, development and implementation of the residential school system — of the horrendous atrocities committed against Aboriginal people in these institutions. For the protection of our future generations, our culture and our way of life, the Aboriginal peoples advocate that such an institution — or anything like it — never be established again. To this end we recommend that research be undertaken to document the work of all institutions that have taken part in the cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples — adoption, foster care, justice. This body of research could focus on many themes, including investigation of the injuries suffered through multiple forms of abuse, whether physical, spiritual, mental, emotional or sexual, and of the premature deaths of the adult survivors of these institutions. Further, that sufficient resources (information, financial, human) be available to children of these institutions who wish to reunite with their families and to all Aboriginal people who have been affected adversely by these establishments to heal from the suffering they have endured.

8b. That more healing centres be established with appropriate resources to provide accessible services to all Aboriginal people in the urban centre; these centres would include focus on health, personal and family development and counselling using traditional healing methods and the incorporation of a critical history of colonization. And that learning circles be promoted and used for education, awareness and healing among Aboriginal people.

8c. That rural wilderness treatment and rehabilitative camps be established for Aboriginal people of all ages, particularly youth, ideally to be run by rural Aboriginal communities and tribal councils, where people would have access to traditional cultural technologies and survival skills, ceremonies and role models.

8d. That more Aboriginal people be funded to undergo training to become effective counsellors and facilitators in the healing centres, and that these training programs include elements of decolonization, unlearning racism and cultural awareness in service delivery.

8e. That longer-term alcohol and drug treatment facilities and aftercare co-op houses with education/job training be built and maintained at the urban community and reserve level. This

approach assists with home community connections and with employment at the local level. Alcohol and drug treatment must include a historical overview of Aboriginal addictions and their connection to colonization and racism. Access to Alanon, Alateen and Alcoholics Anonymous at the reserve and community level — which are prepared to discuss the historical oppression of Aboriginal peoples and racism as triggers to undoing sobriety — is needed.

9. Resources and Economic Development

9a. That Aboriginal peoples' right to participation, consultation and decision making on the major development projects affecting their lives and territories be legislated as fundamental to these developments.

9b. That Aboriginal people have the freedom to promote economic activities such as gambling, casinos, hunting and fishing, and that small businesses using elders, crafts people, artists, writers, etc. be supported and promoted to boost employment and economic development within the urban Aboriginal community.

9c. That the government maintain and enhance the financial allocation for friendship centres and other urban organizations involved in the promotion and support of Aboriginal peoples.

9d. That funding be increased to create more culturally relevant services for Aboriginal people within federal penal institutions.

9e. That financial resources be available for the promotion of Aboriginal programming within communication and media institutions.

9f. That opportunities be created for Aboriginal people to obtain or purchase adequate housing in urban settings so that families can live in safe neighbourhoods.

9g. That Aboriginal communities join the modern technological network that is capable of facilitating networking and lobbying power, coalition building, and knowledge building with regard to children, youth and adults living in urban settings.

10. Decolonization and Unlearning Racism

10a. That all of the following organizations and institutions have comprehensive programs for decolonization, anti-racism training and cultural sensitivity as part of their training and continuing professional development: police departments, RCMP, correctional officers and

justice organizations, social services, social workers, mental health professionals, community workers, youth workers and child welfare workers, medical services and professionals, alcohol and drug counsellors, teachers and educational services.

10b. That non-Aboriginal professionals have training to address issues related to urban migration. Often urban issues are extensions of what is taking place in rural communities.

10c. That systematic decolonization (Aboriginal and mainstream) be recognized as a national mental health priority and implemented in all education and human services practices in Canada.

10d. In recognition that decolonization implies throwing off the vestiges of privilege and oppression — because colonization requires a colonizer and the colonized — non-Aboriginal people must do their work in recognizing their privilege and how they consciously or unconsciously uphold and perpetuate the Canadian racist state. At the same time Aboriginal people need to do our own work in empowering our people and recognizing how internalized racism makes us comply in our collective oppression. Therefore appropriate educational strategies to facilitate decolonization must be instituted.

Cultural Identity for Urban Aboriginal People Learning Circles Synthesis Report

by Kathy Absolon and Tony Winchester

In the context of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and federal, provincial and local governments, programs devised by external governing bodies for Aboriginal people have often been unsuccessful. History has shown repeatedly that it is neither cost-effective nor wise to continue with this method of policy and program development. To ensure sustained positive effects of any program, Aboriginal people must have the mandate to make decisions that will have long-term effects on their lives. In short, Aboriginal people have the right to control their lives, their communities, their institutions and their future. In the past those rights have been denied. In addition to the denial of a self-determining role in the governing of their nations, the membership of those nations has been bound by externally enforced definitions of who belongs and who does not. The effect of such a policy has been the alienation of individuals and families from their rightful place in the nation of their ancestry. In the end there exists a great void for many people who wish to nurture their relationship to a culture that is just beyond their grasp yet fundamental to their sense of identity.

Developmental Period: Guiding Assumptions

In the early rounds of the Royal Commission's community hearings and throughout the development stages of various urban perspectives research projects, it became clear that underlying much of the discussion was the fundamental issue of identity. It also became clear that, though the issue of identity was presented as extremely meaningful for participants in the hearings and studies, the reasons people emphasize identity and the meanings they attach to the concept were quite diverse. Therefore, one guiding assumption for this project was that it is highly important at this time to reach a clear understanding of Aboriginal cultural identity, as it has an impact on most other issues of spiritual, social and political significance for Aboriginal people (e.g., self-determination, self-governance, land rights). With this in mind the urban

perspectives research team devised a cultural identity project using learning circles and case studies to clarify exactly what cultural identity consists of for Aboriginal people, how it is diminished or enhanced, and what role it plays in the participants' daily life.

Among the assumptions guiding this study was the belief that the concept of cultural identity can be distinguished and communicated by Aboriginal people in learning circles or focus groups. Further, the research team wished to present the feelings and ideas of community people, as opposed to using academic references, in conveying this information. Further, the team wanted a data collection method that left participants unharmed by the experience and also gave something to the communities and individuals taking part in the exercise (e.g., skills and information to further their exploration and nurturance of Aboriginal cultural identity).

As well, there was an assumption that, although there is a distinction between 'culture' (a group or community phenomenon) and 'identity' (as an individual phenomenon), there is a significant reciprocal relationship between the two. This division was the subject of much debate within the research team. Some members felt the emphasis should be on individual identity, because culture is something outside the individual that they must relate to. Others felt that cultural identity is a phenomenon that dwells within the individual and should be the focus of the information sought. In the end, the team decided on 'cultural identity' instead of simply 'identity'. Cultural identity focuses on the part of the individual identity arising from membership in the cultural group of Aboriginal people. Additionally, culture is sometimes defined in a very limited way; for example, some people use the term to denote various traditional elements of Aboriginal societies (drums, tobacco, dances, songs, art). In reality, culture covers a much broader spectrum in the lives of Aboriginal people in the late twentieth century. Culture in the contemporary environment includes the traditional elements but also consists of the political, artistic, educational, spiritual, health, economic, and other present-day practices and institutions that have evolved out of the past. In defining culture more broadly, this research project sought to reveal diverse personal expressions of Aboriginal identity that are manifest in the lives of the individual people we spoke with. There is a need to survey people from different sociodemographic, gender, geographic, language and Aboriginal groups in order to derive global issues and defining qualities of cultural identity that truly represent the diversity of Aboriginal peoples. All of these assumptions guide this synthesis report.

Early Goals

Two important early goals of the project were to get more information about the issues from a wide range of people and also to create a structured and safe environment that would allow participants in this undertaking to learn about and explore cultural identity with greater depth and clarity. With these general goals in mind the team hired a facilitator to devise a research strategy based on a focus group format.

The learning circle (or focus group) format was considered an effective model for obtaining information of this nature, as it allows for the development of trust and comfort necessary to examine these sensitive issues in as much depth as possible. A focus group consists of a group of people sitting down with a facilitator to discuss an issue. The facilitator helps the group explore the issue as effectively as possible within the time parameters of the group; his/her role includes directing the flow of topics under discussion as well as summarizing and clarifying the information expressed by the group.

Methodology

Group Structure and Format

The research team devised a number activities for the group sessions that reflected three aims: (1) to explore Aboriginal cultural identity, (2) to share and explore life experiences, and (3) to seek recommendations from participants. In the end, six activities were chosen for use in an initial pilot project and, subsequently, in the ten focus groups. Here is the format used for the ten groups:

Day One

Opening Ceremony and Prayer

This prayer or ceremony is arranged by the community co-ordinator and is conducted by people of the community to conform to local cultural practice.

Introductions

Each group begins with the members sitting in a circle together. The facilitators begin the process by introducing themselves and the project, then participants briefly introduces themselves.

Greeting

All participants and facilitators are given an opportunity to greet each other, moving around the circle to meet each person individually.

Establishing Group Rules

The facilitator leads a process of getting the group to establish rules pertaining to confidentiality, comfort and respect in order to ensure safety within the group.

Dream Activity

Using the scenario of an elder visiting in a dream, this activity is designed to help participants focus on the issues of cultural identity. The elder asks, who are you at this time in your life? Participants are then asked to respond in a way that expresses their present state of cultural identity.

Community Activity

In this activity the participants pretend they are in the position of being community decision makers who are responsible for the welfare of seven generations of their community. They are then asked to answer three questions: (1) What are the core elements of cultural identity as it relates to a sense of belonging within an Aboriginal group? (2) What is the basis of belonging within your Aboriginal group (membership/citizenship)? (3) How do we preserve and enhance the cohesiveness of your Aboriginal group?

Lunch

General Discussion of Core Elements of Cultural Identity

This discussion centred around significant questions about participants' experiences and relationships with respect to cultural identity:

1. What are the important events and experiences in your life?
2. What are the most important places in your life?
3. What are the most significant events in your life?
4. What significant groups most influence your life?
5. What agencies, programs or organizations have had profound effects on your life?
6. What historical (personal and national/global) events have been of vital importance to you?
7. At present, what events or activities are of vital concern to you with respect to your cultural identity?

Large Group Discussion

This exchange focuses on life experiences that have strengthened or diminished cultural identity in the urban setting. The key questions were:

1. What are the important events and experiences that diminish/strengthen cultural identity in your life?
2. What are the important places in your life that serve to diminish/strengthen your cultural identity?
3. What are the significant groups in your life that influence your cultural identity by diminishing/strengthening it?
4. What agencies, programs or organizations have had profound effects on your cultural identity?
5. At present, what events or activities are of vital concern to you in relation to your cultural identity?

Closing Prayer to End Day One

Day Two

Opening Prayer or Brief Ceremony

Large Group Discussion

This discussion centres on the following questions:

1. Do you feel that you have been deprived or denied any aspect of your cultural identity? If so, how do you deal with this? What do you do?
2. What ways has your cultural identity been improved or strengthened? What do you do with this?

"Kinships/Relationships within the Journey of My Life" Activity

In this exercise each participant is given a piece of paper and a pencil and asked to draw a circle on the paper symbolizing the Aboriginal community. Then participants are asked to divide the circle into different sections of pie that represent the people, groups, organizations or events that have affected their cultural identity. The size of each section should reflect the relative importance that each event/relationship/experience has contributed. As well, they are asked to divide each section in two with a dotted line and use + or — signs to indicate the degree of positive and negative impact the section represents. After everyone has completed their circles they are asked to share them with the group.

In the next part of the activity the facilitator asks the group to do the same type of circle but instead of the Aboriginal community they are asked to represent the same information with respect to the mainstream community.

In the final stage of the activity the participants are given another piece of paper and asked to do the same circles but to draw them side by side. Further they are asked to draw the circles, mainstream and Aboriginal, indicating the comparative importance of the two worlds for their cultural identity by altering the sizes according to their life experience.

The facilitator ends the exercise by generating discussion on the activity using these questions: How do you feel about yourself in relation to these two worlds? Is there conflict or incompatibility between the two as they relate to your sense of cultural identity? Are the two realities compatible? Is there balance between the two communities?

Lunch

Recommendations from Participants

The last major activity of the two-day session involved asking participants to generate two lists of recommendations, one for each of the following questions:

1. What needs to be changed that has diminished cultural identity?
2. What would strengthen cultural identity?

Thanks Expressed to Participants, Gifts Exchanged and Ending Prayer

The activities for two-day period were designed to promote a sense of respect and safety for group participants so that they would feel less inhibited in sharing personal information that, at times, could be profoundly sensitive. Over the course of the circle participants reach increasingly significant levels of disclosure as they progressed through the activities and bonded as a group. The facilitator had a highly important role in trying to ensure that members felt at ease throughout the sessions — directing the flow of the group's discussion, clarifying what was being said and summarizing the information had to be done with the utmost respect and sensitivity to the nature of the information. Further, group members were informed that their participation in any dialogue was completely voluntary, that they should speak only when they felt ready, and that only one speaker would speak at a time, so as to ensure that the others were listening respectfully.

This format was used first for a pilot group in February 1993 in Ottawa with the goal of refining the design if needed before the ten scheduled sessions; very minor changes were made after this session. Further, a community co-ordinator was hired in each of the focus communities to perform the following functions: promote the learning circles project in the area; solicit potential participants (25 or more from each site); administer some pre-group selection functions such as obtaining signed consent forms and completing applications. They were also responsible for logistical issues such as the space and food for the event.

Another important set of tasks for the community co-ordinator was to make arrangements for support or healing of participants who might need it, given the nature of some of the information covered in the learning circles. To this end the co-ordinator invited a spiritual elder to take part in the two-day sessions; this person would be locally respected and would provide insight, support or counselling to those in need. Additionally, the co-ordinator made arrangements with other Aboriginal and mainstream agencies or individuals to provide similar counselling services if there was sufficient need among the members of the circle.

The Process and Criteria for Choosing Participants

In the developmental stages of the project a decision was made to try to include a wide range of Aboriginal people in the project. Accordingly, each of the focus sites was chosen to represent a different cultural and geographical territory (coastal, northern, western, eastern). Each place also

targeted a specific group identity — for example, artists, elders, youth. Next, interested participants' applications were examined by members of the research team to try to achieve broad representation within each group (male/female, age, tribal affiliations, length of time in the urban setting). One other variable used in the selection process was the degree of contact with Aboriginal groups or organizations, as measured by a brief section in the application form; this measurement helped the research team choose a range of people, from those who had little contact with Aboriginal people and organizations to those at the other end of the spectrum who were substantially involved in the urban Aboriginal community. Overall, the research team tried to balance the goals of representing a diversity of Aboriginal people while attempting to create a group that was homogenous enough to consolidate quickly and work together effectively.

The final selection of ten groups included a cross-section of 114 urban Aboriginal people from six different urban communities in six separate provinces. The participants also come from a variety of Aboriginal groups: Inuit, Métis and Indian (status/non-status, treaty/non-treaty). With this selection we aspired to achieve a representative discussion of the essential elements of cultural identity for urban Aboriginal people in Canada. The schedule for the 10 two-day session is outlined in the next section.

Schedule of Events

Dates (1993)	Locations	Groups
March 15-19	Victoria	Artists
March 15-19	Victoria	Métis
March 29-April 2	Winnipeg	Métis
March 29-April 1	Winnipeg	Male Inmates
April 7-8	Quebec City	Professional service providers
April 26-30	Inuvik, N.W.T.	Inuvialuit youth
April 26-30	Inuvik	Inuvialuit adults
May 17-21	Halifax	Women
May 17-21	Halifax	Elders
May 26-27	Saskatoon	Treaty Indians

Collection and Analysis of Data

All the learning circles were videotaped with the permission of participants. As well, all written information from the group — flip charts, pencil and paper activity, facilitator notes — was used in the final documents. The raw data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively to create two separate reports.

For the quantitative analysis the research team created a framework to interpret and code the information from the sessions. This framework was used to examine all activities and group members separately in order to analyze the content of the learning circles. To check the reliability of the framework, two viewers watched trial samples of the video footage and compared their outcomes; after slight modifications to the research instrument, it was used for the final rating of each learning circle — done separately by the two raters. These scoring sheets, the flip charts and other written information were then given to a third researcher to construct the final quantitative analysis report. In the final report, the findings of the quantitative assessment based on the following themes are presented, with respect to cultural identity: behavioral expression, importance, perception, maintenance, esteem, consolidation/confusion, factors of influence, and analysis of social process. The report also offers a review of academic literature, some interpretation of the data as well as a brief discussion of the policy implications of the findings.

For the qualitative analysis researchers viewed the videotapes of all the sessions and generated, first, a descriptive analysis of each group; this descriptive analysis was structured based on the major areas of discussion in each of the two-day sessions. Next, the research team identified the predominant themes that arose across all groups and interpreted this information using a perspective that integrates the social, political, economic, and historical experiences of Aboriginal people into the discussion. The final report consists of a methodology section; three of the descriptive analyses (there were many common themes and the report would have been excessively long and repetitive if all ten had been included — the other group descriptions are in the appendix and remain accessible to those who wish to consult them); an analysis section; and a list of more than 50 recommendations.

Limitations of the Study

One drawback of the study was that the focus was limited to urban Aboriginal people. Though the research team set out to study urban people, in the future, to derive a more inclusive understanding of the issue of identity for Aboriginal people, it would be crucial to stage a number of learning circles on rural reserves and communities in different parts of the country.

In general, government-sponsored research is viewed with great suspicion in many Aboriginal communities; the Royal Commission was no exception to these feelings. Aboriginal people have been the subject of much government-funded research that came with the promise of a better life that has yet to materialize. Thus, there was reluctance on the part of some people to participate in the study, to the point that some walked away from the learning circle as soon as they found out who was funding the program. For the facilitators the first step was always to establish an ethic of trust and safety to counter the natural defensiveness of some participants; some group members stated that they stayed out of respect for the Aboriginal researchers and professionals involved in the project.

Another limitation of the project was that two other facilitators were hired and briefed to work on the Quebec City learning circle for reasons of language. Thus, for the writing of this report we relied on their interpretations of that two-day session in the form of a written analysis, translated from the original French, submitted by each of the facilitators. Without question, some of the nuances of the original data were compromised by this process.

One last limitation of the study was that the validation process for the draft report was be difficult to fulfil completely, as the groups were put together for purposes of the learning circles and were not necessarily part of a continuing community. Given the participants' widespread distribution over the regions represented in this project, it is likely that not every person will be able to endorse the validity of the report. Still, the Royal Commission will do everything in its power to ensure that as many participants as possible read the draft report and are given an opportunity to give feedback on the information. This validation process will afford the report a higher degree of reliability and integrity, in consideration of RCAP's original commitment to ethical research.

Descriptive Analyses of the Learning Circles

To decide which of the groups to include in the main body of the report, the researchers considered all the descriptions, participant validations and peer reviews and chose the Victoria artists, the Inuvialuit adults and the Halifax elders. These three circles were chosen to give variety (based on regionalism and specific issues) to the report. Further, in the analysis section the Winnipeg inmates circle and the Saskatoon Treaty circle are often quoted; as well, in the analysis the issues of women (drawing mainly from Halifax) and youth (drawing from Inuvik) are also given substantial coverage. The material from the Quebec City learning circle is based on a written translation and is somewhat shallow, possibly as a result of the difficulties of conveying this type of information in another language. The Winnipeg Métis circle description was based on only one day of audio data because of a technical failure for the entire first day, so some issues could not be reported in sufficient depth. The Victoria Métis circle was not included in final report because many of the issues were sufficiently exposed in other settings and because the Victoria artists circle was also very good — and we could choose only one group from the west to provide regional variation. The remaining three circles presented a very broad examination of the issues discussed in most of the other circles.

Victoria Artists Learning Circle

The group of artists assembled in Victoria included 12 participants from various west coast Aboriginal nations and one woman was from an eastern coastal group. The group included seven men and five women, ranging in age from 28 to 52. Half the group could still speak their Aboriginal language. Most of the members maintain significant ties to a home community or reserve.

The present: core elements of cultural identity

In this part of the discussion three of the group members began by stating that they were at a crossroads (in limbo, confused) in their life when it came to their cultural identity. They seemed to be saying that they have a strong will to revitalize their experience of Aboriginal identity but they are not sure how to go about finding the resources they need to accomplish this. At different times in the discussion the members talked about feeling alienated by their community and by the urban lifestyle; thus they were torn about where to seek support for their specific needs.

Some of the members pointed to the government-generated labels of status and non-status as being at the root of the exclusivity, separation and division that burdens the Aboriginal community in general and, more specifically, their own lives. In the same breath people spoke of their great disappointment with the outcome of Bill C-31 changes to the *Indian Act*, as they had had great hope for its ability to overcome the divisions of the past that were the source of alienation from home and community for many Aboriginal people. In short, the experience for many participants in this circle is that they pick up pieces of Aboriginal culture where ever they can; at times this includes using cultural elements from other nations that may be more immediately accessible or adapted to their needs. Given the mix of Aboriginal people in urban centres, the group recognized the need for urban institutions that could serve as a meeting place for different people and also as a resource centre to gain access to information and services relevant to strengthening identity and commitment to one's specific cultural group or tribal affiliation.

Language is universally considered to be a central part of the experience of identity; those participants who could not speak their language longed to reclaim that part of their tradition, as language was considered a gateway to taking part in so many other aspects of their Aboriginal community. Most notably, members felt that language was used in the spiritual practices of their communities and if they could not speak it then they would not be able to take part in this central part of the community tradition that includes ceremony, ritual, dances, songs and stories.

With respect to the individual and the group, a land base or ancestral region was also highly significant. All group members identified with a place, be it a geographical region or a specific community outside the city. For all it was important to remain in contact with this place, as it was where they had to go to learn more about their traditions or to strengthen ties with family members and friends. The geographic element of place of origin was important because the culture derived its ritual, ceremony and traditions (foods, work, etc.) from the land and ocean of that area. The place also contained important people (family, elders, leaders) who could help some individuals in the group strengthen their cultural identity. For other members, community contact people (people established in their ancestral land base) played more of a supportive role, as these group members seemed to have remained heavily involved in their community; in this context the home community or place of origin offered a vital sense of belonging not found in the urban centre. Certainly the most significant group of contact people consisted of family

members. A consistent relationship with family members ensured access to other cultural information (family stories, songs, crests, traditional food, traditional dress) and inclusion in cultural festivities. Outside the family the community was a place to gain access to elders as highly revered resources for cultural information and learning. One speaker summed up this issue this way:

It is important for me to go back to my childhood because that is where my culture is.... It is important for me to go back to my [homeland] because that is where the recovery begins.

The feeling of belonging to an ancestral community or place was closely associated with what the members identified as a common bond with all Aboriginal peoples and nations; this bond was important for the cultural identity of both the individual and the group. The basis of the bond to other Aboriginal cultures is the central place of the traditional stories, the pain and the injustices that have been perpetrated against these people all over the world. Other elements of the bond include the universal connection to the earth, air, water and all animals and plants — summed up in the phrase 'all my relations' — shared by all Aboriginal cultures.

Throughout the discussion of the core elements of cultural identity, the members often spoke about the devastating impact of residential schools on their traditions and the destruction of their families and communities. Some members also spoke about foster homes in the same light as the residential school experience. The next section contains a more extensive discussion of residential schools and other significant phenomena in the lives of the participants in this circle.

The past: significant events, experiences, people, places

The second theme of discussion involved looking at events, experiences, relationships, programs, agencies or any other part of participants' lives as it has affected their sense of cultural identity. For the most part participants gave one or two examples of important turning points or events that had had a profound bearing on their path of learning the history and traditions of their Aboriginal culture.

The group discussion was diverse, as the question was very broad, but there were identifiable commonalities in the types of experiences they talked about. For example, many experienced a transformation through involvement in a social or political meeting with other Aboriginal people. One man spoke of a "total transformation", when he was sixteen, while

attending a three-day meeting with members of Aboriginal nations from all over British Columbia.

I went to a Union of British Columbia Native Chiefs meeting at 16 years old and, until then, I really had no idea there were so many tribes all over B.C. I went through school and learned about some of the groups but they were names not people; the conference opened my eyes to people because in the evenings the youth groups would sit around and I would hear the Nisgaa youth talk about their land claims battle and other similar issues. Our people were way behind that, we were passively accepting what DIA gave to us. It opened my mind that we can do things to make our lives better. I couldn't perceive a different way of being before the meetings. I experienced a total transformation in the three days — I began a young naive boy and left with many new ideas and an understanding of the diversity of cultures. The conference opened my mind to realize that I need to know these people more, knowing my culture is not enough, all over the island there were all different people. Politically, it opened my mind that we need to fight peacefully, through the system. That agency and time was important to me because they did fight to ensure change would begin and we have progressed.

In this three-day period, by meeting and speaking with people engaged in political and cultural campaigns for the betterment of their community, he realized that he did have some power to effect change in his life. The same thing happened to a man who experienced change more gradually by working with many different urban Aboriginal social and political organizations over a number of years. One woman relayed her story of forming an Aboriginal alliance on a university campus after hearing about an incident of extreme institutional racism in the provincial justice system. In hindsight this woman was able to laugh as she told the group the story of her progression from an extremely naive and unaware young woman through her progressive stages of politicization and re-education with respect to the impact of racism and marginalization in the lives of Aboriginal people all over the world. For all these people, each progressive political struggle seemed to deepen their commitment to nurturing their sense of cultural identity.

One of the most — if not the most — significant experiences from the past for many of the participants was the time they spent in the residential school system. The effects of these institutions are multi-generational and pervasive in the lives of the people who attended them. By removing children from families ten months of the year for five years or more, the system interrupted the transmission of culture from generation to generation. In addition, while at the schools children were punished for speaking their language and told they must abandon their belief system and spiritual practices in favour of the Euro-Christian world view as espoused by

the religious people running the institutions. A group member began to cry as soon as she started sharing the painful significance of the residential school in her life:

The most profound experience is the residential school. It is an issue I work on daily. It affects me so deeply because I have children and they say the impact of the residential school system will remain for seven generations. I went to the residential school conference in Vancouver and wondered what I have to cry about because I wasn't sexually or physically abused, but I did experience some emotional abuse. But I feel a lot of confusion because my grandparents were very traditional and I grew up with their influence. The residential school system taught us we would go to hell for being Native no matter how holy we were. I knew I never felt good in residential school because I didn't like being away from my home and family. But I was in the school for 8 years. Before I went away my mom and dad were active community people who cared and after I returned from residential school they were alcoholics. This had a major effect on my life. I've only begun to heal in recent years.

The profoundly painful, mandatory removal of children from their families is something that people in all the learning circles talked about. One day the house was full of children, and the next day there was silence throughout the entire community.

Alcoholism was a major destructive force in the lives of most of the group participants — as the previous woman's experience demonstrates. For many people, there was a very strong relationship between the residential school experience and alcoholism in their own lives, their families and their communities. Alcohol was used to numb the immense pain of grief and loss experienced by most families when the government took away their children. The residential schools also effectively destroyed the parenting skills of generations of Aboriginal people who were institutionalized during a critical period of their lives when most children would be learning these things and others in the normal socialization process within the family environment. The woman just quoted also described how her mother could love but not parent, and she feels that she is repeating this pattern, though she struggles daily to be a better parent and pass on a more positive legacy to her children. At one point in her story the woman recalled how she was obsessed with the Holocaust during her teen years — in hindsight she realized that the motivation for this obsession was the close parallels between the treatment of Aboriginal people in Canada and the Nazi's treatment of the Jews.

Bill C-31 was another issue raised by a number of group members. For the most part people spoke of the bill as something they originally looked forward to with hopes, sometimes apprehensive, that it would have positive effects on their lives. One man thought it would be his

ticket back to the reserve community that he feels alienated from to this day — his hopes were dashed after the bill was passed, as he experienced the same barriers to inclusion. He spoke of how, in the end, the bill was "empty" and the only change he could see was that "a lot of people got little cards that said they were status." Today he feels as though his culture is just beyond his grasp.

For another man, Bill C-31 changed little in his life, but it is one impetus to campaign against government-defined labels of Aboriginal identity that cause internal divisions in the Aboriginal community. This man saw the potential divisions that the bill would cause before it was passed, and to this day he fights for recognition of Aboriginal status based on the traditions and relationships of the culture one comes from, not the definitions of external governing bodies.

Though the underlying causes are wide-ranging, substance abuse had been a destructive force with respect to the cultural identity of most group members. For many of the people speaking, over a prolonged period of disorientation and pain they were unable to continue nurturing and expressing their distinct cultural identity. Some describe this period as a time of great darkness and self-destruction, directed not only to their Aboriginal identity but also their families, their relationships and themselves. In contrast, members expressed great gratitude for their present sobriety, as it allows them the clarity and will to focus on their health — mind, body and spirit. In a related sense, a turning point for some people came at an addictions treatment facility where they regained their sobriety and their sense of self; for some, a cultural element of the treatment process helped them to reclaim parts of their spiritual and healing traditions. As well, the healing centres brought them into contact with other Aboriginal people who were experiencing the same pain and healing process, which allowed all concerned to glimpse the pervasive effects of colonization and racism on their collective lives.

Positive childhood experiences, often under the guidance of a grandparent, where tradition was conveyed or directly taught, was a recurring theme for the participants. These types of stories were often told by members as a contrast to a period or event of great destruction to their Aboriginal identity. Many spoke with gratitude of a time when they acquired a foundation for learning their culture at an early age; for example, one man spoke of learning songs and dances as a child as the "spark that lit the fire" for him. Other people talked at length of a terrible period in their lives when they were confused or their Aboriginal identity was repressed in some way. Many of the participants then referred to a time before the period of disorientation when

they established a link to their family, community or nation; it is this time that they draw on now in order to re-establish stronger bonds for the future. On this theme one member spoke of family and community as a "sanctuary" where you are accepted for who you are, a place where you can be genuinely yourself and feel valued as a result. It is in an accepting environment such as this man describes that people begin to feel healthy and whole.

The issue of family surfaced in different ways throughout the discussion of core elements of cultural identity. In addition to speaking of their families as the place where they began to learn about their traditions and their ancestry when they were very young — from grandparents and parents — other aspects of family were also examined. Many spoke of how their role as a parent motivates them to learn what they can about their Aboriginal heritage in order to pass it on to their children. One man shared a story of how he helped his mother return to her community in her last days to reclaim her status and the land that was rightfully hers. In this process she died and he was able to give her a traditional burial with the support of the community to which she returned. These incidents brought him to a more profound appreciation of his place in the family and in the Aboriginal community.

Another young man spoke of family in a less positive light; he was a victim of great physical and emotional abuse and trauma throughout his childhood. Though he knew none of the traditional songs, dances, ceremonies or language, he still expressed a strong identification with his Aboriginal community. He had also embarked on a path of healing and learning about the roots of his father's destructive behaviour. Though this young man is only beginning to understand some of the effects of colonization, he has learned enough to let go of some of the feelings of shame he "inherited" as well as some of the anger he feels toward his parents. As with many young people, ignorance about the underlying source of his feelings of anger and frustration with his parents has always been a fundamental block to his will to learn more about his identity as an Aboriginal person. This is how it was expressed by the youngest member of the artists circle:

We kids had to carry our parents' pain and victimization. [Voice starts to quiver.] I have a vision in my head that I will never beat my kids and they will always have food and clothes. They won't have to be like me, they won't have to wonder why their father beats them. [Crying now.] All my life...why? why? why? And I still don't know why. I don't want that for me. I try to seek everything I can get my hands on to protect myself. Every tool, from quitting drinking to controlling this anger and this rage I carry — that's not even mine! Maybe because of the

residential school? I don't know. They haven't told me. How can I work on something I don't even know what the reasons were? I struggle with this. I'm just finding out that it wasn't my fault — I wasn't a bad kid. After 22 years, it wasn't me. I'm finding out that it was the system's fault. I still hurt. I hurt inside because I can't remember.

With these words he passionately expressed the confusion and anguish that youth in other learning circles also felt. The lessons of colonization and racism have been internalized by many people who lived through the residential school era and, consequentially, these same destructive phenomena have become intangible forces that haunt the lives of Aboriginal youth who may understand their feelings of pain and confusion but don't fully comprehend the source of them.

Lastly, for these urban people the friendship centre has been something of an oasis in the city. It is an important place to meet other Aboriginal people from a multitude of nations; it is also a resource centre for information and people that may help one nurture a sense of cultural identity and belonging.

Barriers: diminishment and denial of cultural identity

Racism was one of the main diminishing factors people have experienced in their lives. For one man, racism was something he experienced in bars when he was treated quite differently from other patrons. For another man dealing with the social assistance and child welfare authorities was an experience of institutional racism that kept his family apart. Yet another man identified racism in terms of the transition from the small coastal Aboriginal community of his childhood to the city at the age of ten.

My first coming to terms with racism — that was the big impact. Understanding that it *existed!* Because when I was at home I had no idea there was hatred because I had a different skin colour. It was just something I didn't know. I knew people of European descent when I was a child but there was no difference between them and me. But I learned there was a difference when we reached the city. ...there wasn't a lot of positive influence from society when I did reach the city. Because it represents the total destruction, the disintegration of my family. My parents didn't drink when we lived in Friendly Cove. I never saw them *ever* with a drink in their hand. I never did. I don't have any memory of that. And one of the freakiest things that ever happened to me was coming home from school one day and finding my parents drunk. I mean I couldn't believe it. They were totally different people. Who were they? I walked in and these are not my parents ... Within a year they were animals and I didn't know who they were.

Like these men, most people who spoke about their experiences of racism suggested it reinforced the oppressive weight of marginalization and alienation that overwhelmingly stifles the

expression of their Aboriginal identity.

Along the same theme as racism, a man spoke of his experience in residential school as a "disastrous" life experience that destroyed his sense of Aboriginal identity and himself. He told the group that since leaving that institution he had spent most of his life on skid row — feeling confused and culturally barren — and now he is trying to re-educate himself. He drew sharp contrasts between what he learned from his grandfather in the way of gentle teachings about life and what he subsequently learned at the residential school: "I learned to hate." At one point, he expressed a profound question with a mixture of disbelief and melancholy: "I wonder where I would be if I didn't go to residential school." His goal now is to pursue a career in the justice system in order to work toward equity for Aboriginal people, in reaction to the denial of justice that is at the core of his own life.

The issue of language came up a number of times in relation to the denial or diminishment of participants' Aboriginal identity. Without exception the people in the circle recognized the importance of being able to speak one's language as a way of expressing and having access to one's Aboriginal identity. People spoke of their feelings of great hurt and loss because they felt their rites of passage were incomplete without their language. For example, one man told the group that in his nation it is the role of the eldest son to speak at the burial of a parent. This man was noticeably sombre and his voice barely audible as he told the group how he experienced great shame when, at his father's funeral, he could not fulfil this role because he could not speak his language well enough. Another man told the group, with a hoarse voice quivering with emotion, about the pain and loss he felt because he could not take part in the Big House ceremonies and rituals that are at the centre of his community's spiritual tradition. Thus, he was denied communication with the elders and the teachings they had to offer; he was also denied the ability to speak in the Big House. Some of the members spoke of the envy they felt when they saw people from other cultures speaking their traditional language with their children. Members also spoke of their present struggles to learn their language as adults. One woman stated a common sentiment: "One of my dreams is to learn my language; but where do I learn it in downtown Victoria?" The group noted that it is impossible to learn a language with only a one-hour class each week; in the urban centre, they were also denied a suitable learning environment for the transmission of language as well as other traditional aspects of their culture. Also, some of the speakers stated that they did not have enough will to learn the language

because they had not yet made the commitment to do so.

Traditional parenting techniques were another part of the culture that group members felt deprived of. Parenting came into the discussion in different ways; for example, a man spoke of the need to renew traditional parenting practices, as the mainstream methods of parenting and education are insufficient to instil the types of skills needed to live a productive life. This man proposed a research project to collect information about traditional parenting practices from different sources and then create a guide or curriculum to teach people these methods. Many of the members felt they had not been parented in a way that allowed them to learn the survival skills of their traditional culture. Generally, the members said they felt they had been denied two fundamental arenas for the conveyance of tradition and life skills — family and community.

Other aspects of culture that members spoke of being denied of were traditional regalia and traditional food gathering practices. One man told the group of his great sense of pride and accomplishment when he was able to catch enough fish to provide his immediate and extended family with a supply of food; other members could identify this act as important but missing from their lives. The fisherman said he thirsted for more traditional information about how to gather and prepare food in order to use these methods to support himself and his family. Later this man also spoke of the importance of new technologies for fishing, suggesting an integration of the best of traditional and contemporary methods. Similarly, a man spoke of how he sometimes felt like wearing some traditional garb as an alternative to jeans and a t-shirt.

When discussing sources for the denial or deprivation of their Aboriginal identity, some speakers also identified alcoholism and foster homes; more often speakers identified residential schools as a highly devastating force or fundamental barrier to the expression of identity. Many people spoke in terms of the culture they learned in early childhood, years before residential school, and what they pieced together after having their culture forcibly, sometimes violently or abusively, suppressed for the years they spent in these institutions. The residential school deprived them of everything from language, to parenting skills, to food gathering and preparation, to ritual and ceremony, to family and community — all were nearly destroyed in an attempt by mainstream policy makers to obliterate Aboriginal cultures and speed up the colonial assimilation process.

Empowerment: cultural identity strengthened and enhanced

One fundamental quality that has strengthened participants' identity is simply the willingness and desire to learn and participate in activities that could help them nurture understanding and growth. Members felt that without this initial willingness to risk they would not have been able to learn more about their heritage. They also felt that the present resurgence of pride and healing within the Aboriginal community in general is a positive phenomenon that instills in some a curiosity and motivation to reclaim parts of their ancestry. Another participant claimed that hard work by so many Aboriginal people over the last 20 years or so has contributed greatly to the pride he feels personally and the collective esteem of all Aboriginal people.

The participants spoke of their children as a force in their life that strengthens their desire to learn more about their ancestry and their identity as Aboriginal persons. One man was working hard on his sobriety to reunite his family and teach his children, among other things, the songs and dances of his nation. Others said their children were the most meaningful reason for working so hard to renew their relationship with their own culture (taking part in ceremonies, listening to elders, learning about tradition and family history). These people believed that it was important at least to give the young ones exposure to the various cultural activities and practices so that the next generation could make a choice about whether to integrate these lessons from the past in the present. It was also highly important for the people who spoke on this issue that the children know their heritage in order to allow the traditions to continue and thrive for generations to come and also for positive spiritual and mental health. To this end, one woman said she was recreating a family map on her wall at home; each time she found out about another relative she would add to it so that her children would know where they come from. The strengthening quality of knowing one's family and roots was brought up by other speakers when discussing their own health, and more than one person thought they might be dead right now if they had never acquired some understanding of their Aboriginal tradition and present-day community. One man said the depth of his cultural ancestry and understanding the importance of keeping his clan roots intact has nourished him with the strength to recover from alcohol addiction.

One of the men in the circle told two emotion-laden stories that illustrated the powerful impact that acts of self-determination had on his hope for, and commitment to, the renewal of Aboriginal identity and solidarity. The speaker summarized the importance of these two stories with a strong statement, verging on defiant anger: "You talk about self-government? Well, you

have to *do* self-government!" In the first account, he told the group of how a younger person recently asked permission to use his Aboriginal name, in accordance with the traditional practices of their nation. In the second story, after his mother died the band came to him as the rightful inheritor of her land and possessions. The second act was remarkable because this man chose not to seek *Indian Act*-defined status (which he is entitled to since the passing of Bill C-31), so the band made their decision based on traditional practice rather than using government definitions of entitlement. Near the end of this story he stated, "I was born a Native person and I will die a Native person!" to accent his sense of determination and his right to assert his identity as an Aboriginal person. This man felt very strongly that experiences such as these signalled a deeper level of cultural integrity within his community.

When focusing on empowering forces in their lives, members of the circle spoke often of the role of the friendship centre in the urban centre. Many of the people felt that the friendship centre is an important place for them to reach the people and information they need in a way that no other urban organization allows them to do. The participants also spoke repeatedly of how it is important to have a place in the city to go to feel accepted and meet other people of Aboriginal ancestry. On the importance of the centre, one man stated,

The only place I feel myself is in the Native Friendship Centre... this is a place where I feel good about being Native.

Others spoke of the services (education, referral, counselling, outreach, support, addictions) that are offered at the centre as providing a foundation on which they can base their efforts in diverse areas of their lives.

Access to traditional knowledge was an important strengthening characteristic for one young man. This speaker said he "grew up in the cement jungle" and had little contact with his Aboriginal community until recently. He expressed the importance of having contact people — in his family and in the community where his traditions are practised — who are willing to accept him and help him to nurture his Aboriginal identity. He spoke of his fear at standing outside the Aboriginal community and looking in; he also spoke of his budding will to learn more as he felt accepted within the community. Another important statement by this young man had to do with the balance between the traditions of his ancestors and his reality as a modern Aboriginal man who lives in the city. He said it was important for him to find out how the traditions could help his life and then decide how deeply to invest in learning about them, given the value he attributes to them. This was an important truth in that it exposed the crucial balance all modern Aboriginal

people face, namely, how much of the past is of use in their lives now. How much of a role do the traditional practices of our Aboriginal ancestors play in our lives in the contemporary world? This dilemma was well represented by the words of another speaker in the learning circle who said, "We are making culture and trying to remember tradition."

One man — the fisherman — told the story of how he provided food for family and community members, an act that strengthened his sense of identity and commitment to learning more about his traditions. His ancestors too were fishermen who lived by this ethic of providing for one's community; practising this tradition in a contemporary setting has instilled in him a sense of accomplishment and esteem that he rarely experienced elsewhere. Lastly, one of the women shared with the group how it made her feel proud to attend a public display of traditional dancers; she said witnessing this event brought back positive childhood memories of when she too would dance.

Two communities: Aboriginal and mainstream

For this part of the group process participants were asked to draw three circle diagrams. The first circle was to be a pie chart depicting aspects of the person's Aboriginal community that they felt most influenced their cultural identity. The segments of the pie varied in terms of relative size and positive and negative effects, so that the final picture showed all the most important relationships that made up the community — or, more correctly, a simplified pictorial representation of the community. In the second circle participants did the same pie diagram but for the mainstream community. Lastly participants were asked to draw two blank circles beside each other and label them 'mainstream' and 'Aboriginal'. Further, the circles were to be drawn to reflect relative impact on the identity of the person drawing them. For example, if the person felt both communities had equal influence on their sense of identity then they would draw the circles the same size. If they felt one community was more influential, they would draw that circle larger.

The accompanying table gives the reader an idea of the different aspects of these two communities people included in circle diagrams depicting the major influences on their cultural identity, both positive and negative, from each of the communities. Because participants applied different emphasis to the labels listed it is difficult to state generalizations about any one item. Still, in the mainstream community, government, the church, the child welfare system, the justice

system, alcohol and mainstream values were almost universally negative aspects that covered varying amounts of people's diagrams; the aspects that were generally positive for the group included travel, meeting new people and cultures, entertainment, employment, formal education and access to services. Under the Aboriginal community, although people presented much of the list as positive, the aspects often contained some element of the negative. For example, family might have been highly positive but contained a sliver of negative representing abuse or alcoholism. In the same way, dance groups might be rated as a positive influence, but they might entail a small degree of negative as well having to do with the frustration participants felt in not fully understanding the dances they were trying to learn.

Aboriginal Community	Mainstream Community
family: place of support and learning (+); separation or division from outside influence such as residential school or adoption (-); addictions, abuse, conflict (-)	employment (+); lack of employment (-)
school/education: acquisition of useful skills (+); as a fundamental strategy of cultural genocide (-)	travel (+)
band politics: as a source of division within community (-)	education: skill and knowledge development (+); structured racism and lack of Aboriginal content (-)
dances/singing (+); lack of understanding of underlying tradition (-)	meeting people from and learning about other cultures (+)
carving (+)	friends/other people (+)
Big House/spiritual (+); lack of understanding or access (-)	technology: used to complement traditional skills such as fishing and hunting (+)
potlatch (+)	government: funding or providing some good programs or organizations (+); as agent of control (-)
feasts (+)	church/religion: creating confusion and conflict in communities (-); as one of the driving forces behind residential school (-); as a source of community and spiritual strength and direction for some people (+)
support groups around issues of suicide or addictions (+)	mainstream values: when they are used to diminish or devalue Aboriginal values (-)
language (+); inability to speak (-)	racism (-)
elders, traditional teachers and medicine	residential school (-)

people (+); lack of access to them (-)	
fishing and hunting (+)	alcohol/bars (-)
church: creating confusion and major divisions in community (-); religious instruction, spiritual fellowship and guidance for some people (+)	support groups (+)
stories (+)	addiction treatment (+)
foster parents: offered some support and refuge (+); non-Aboriginal, racist, some abusive (-)	jail/justice system (-)
friends (+)	Friendship Centre (+)
Friendship Centre (+)	no natural environment (-)
Aboriginal organizations (+)	entertainment/arts (+)
sports: brings people together in health and pride (+); as source of rivalry between Aboriginal people (-)	child welfare system (-)
environment/land/nature (+)	non-Aboriginal organizations: that are supportive to Aboriginal peoples (+); that create barriers for Aboriginal people (-)
financial dependency (-)	low urban Aboriginal population (-)

One important observation about this activity is that it brought the two days of discussion into perspective as it was the final activity before participants generated a list of recommendations, and it helped group members integrate much of what they had said and thought about during their time together. With the comparison of the two communities, and because they were able to apply value to each section, the circle exercise allowed participants to try and represent the internal balancing act they perform daily — as contemporary urban Aboriginal people, how do they integrate these two communities and still live their lives in a way that allows them to express their cultural identity fully? The answer lies in the circles drawn, depictions that contain the subtle and specific story of each person's life. In examining the lists provided here it is clear that the term 'cultural identity' covers a vast range and is affected by a broad spectrum of pushes and pulls.

After drawing the circles participants were asked how they felt about themselves in relation to the two communities. Speakers felt varying levels of comfort with their position 'between' the two communities. One speaker found in the past that the experience was entirely

negative as he always felt alien to some degree in both communities; those feelings are changing for him because over his years of effort he has slowly nurtured a degree of respect in both communities and so he passes more easily between them. A woman spoke about the gradual internal transition that has taken place since she left her home community and arrived in the city. For so long she identified more with her community, considering herself to be simply away from home, but her time away has stretched to a number of years. Now she experiences some degree of concern about whether she will remember all the things she was taught in her community — especially at this time, as she recently became a grandmother and this role is very important to her.

One last question asked by the facilitator was this: is there conflict or incompatibility between the two worlds as they relate to cultural identity? For the most part the responses indicated varying degrees of hope for the future, but in the present the speakers felt the two communities were highly conflictual. One man pointed to the vastly different value systems underlying the two cultures as the source of division. Another man spoke of conflict along a continuum; first he described conflict in the rural community as minimal because of long established protocols and tradition. Next he stated how the urban Aboriginal community experiences conflict when people of different nations try to agree on the way things should be done when they all come together. He stated that these differences and the attempts people make to resolve them cause much friction in the urban community. When one considers that the mainstream community is an even greater entity of immense cultural difference, the likelihood of compatibility is minimized. Another stated the other side of this phenomenon: he perceived the federal and provincial governments as having difficulty coming to any agreement on many important matters in Canadian society. Given the political conflict between the mainstream provincial and federal governments, he asked, "How on earth would they come to an understanding of a whole new culture?"

Recommendations

1. That RCAP lobby all government levels to maintain and enhance the financial allocation for friendship centres and other urban organizations.
2. Because government has systematically attempted to strip away the culture of Aboriginal peoples, we recommend that federal and provincial governments participate in cost sharing for the enhancement, maintenance and preservation of all Aboriginal languages of

this country.

3. The establishment and implementation of a national Aboriginal resource network system and centre for the collection, housing, distribution and networking of culturally-based information controlled by and for Aboriginal peoples.
4. The establishment of a national political body to address the needs and concerns of all Aboriginal peoples living in urban centres.
5. The development and implementation of a restructured traditional parenting program to address the destruction and disintegration of the traditional family system.
6. Develop and distribute educational materials consisting of film, print, books and curriculum for the sole purpose of educating the general public in order to build an understanding of the impact of residential schools on Aboriginal people, families and communities across Canada.

Conclusion

The Victoria artists discussed a broad range of factors that enhance or diminish their Aboriginal identity. For example, the residential schools were universally considered to be one of the most devastating forces in the colonial assimilation strategy. These institutions have profoundly interrupted and altered the transmission of many aspects of identity for multiple generations of Aboriginal people. From the people who went to the schools we got first-hand descriptions of how the institutions affected their lives in the past and the present. From the youth we heard how residential schools, one of the assimilation policies directed at their parents' generation, are identified as the basis for the pain, suffering, confusion and rage they inherited from their parents.

To strengthen identity, many people pointed to their healing path, which takes many different forms. For some, healing takes the form of educating themselves with a critical analysis of colonization and the impact of racism and forced assimilation on Aboriginal peoples. For others, meeting other people — at the friendship centre, at treatment centres or perhaps at political gatherings — who share their pain and confusion was both enlightening and healing. Others still are learning about the traditions, the values, the ceremonies, the languages or the celebrations of their Aboriginal nation and this gives them an immense feeling of pride and strength.

Inuvialuit Adults Learning Circle

In the adults learning circle held in Inuvik, N.W.T., there were eleven people: five men and six women, with ages ranging from 18 to 68. Of the group, seven people identified themselves as Inuvialuit and the others identified their cultural background as mixed, with ancestry from the following nations: Cree, Métis, Inupiat, Gwichin, Sigiak and Inuvialuit. Many of the participants were soft-spoken (at times it was very difficult to hear what they were saying), and some who seemed extremely shy spoke very little in the two-day circle. For the most part a core group of five or six people carried on most of the discussion during this learning circle.

The present: core elements of cultural identity

At the centre of their lives in the present the Aboriginal people in Inuvik were struggling to maintain a balance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal influences. This is how one woman described her experience:

You're trying to live a new way of living, through the knowledge of your identity and still trying to live in the White man's world. ...It's just mixed up. You're living your identity the way you were brought up and today trying to live in the White man's world. You're in between...

The economic realities of the North, the environment and the institutions (political, educational) that influence their lives are all factors forcing these people to find ways of maintaining their Inuvialuit identity within the mainstream community. Consistently, the main activity that is supportive of the traditional Inuvialuit lifestyle is going out on the land to bush camps and gatherings, which brings together families and community members. Sharing was identified as an important value at the core of community life. Some of the activities that were important to the Inuvialuit identity included drum dancing, which incorporates songs, sung by elders who also play the drum, that chronicle the history and cultural traditions of the people. The dance is primarily a physical representation of the content of the stories. Another significant dance form is square dancing and jigging to fiddle music.

Traditional food, sometimes called country food, was another core aspect of the Inuvialuit cultural identity because it involved gathering, preparing and sharing with others. The feasts were an important time for people to meet as a community, or for communities to meet each other and celebrate or grieve together.

Feasting and dancing at special times of the year. Like the communities celebrate anniversaries, elders' birthdays, elders gatherings and the end of the spring hunt.

And the Gwichin at the Old Crow, each year they have a gathering of the people from MacPhearson, Aklavik, Alaska and the Yukon. They come together and have the Gwichin gathering. They all gather together in one place and have a big celebration.

Here's another brief example:

A few years ago in Aklavik there was a bow head whale hunt for the first time in [a long time]. The people got a bow head whale and had a big celebration. That brought a lot of people together from different communities.

Feasts and celebrations brought people together with each other and with the land; in doing so there is a continual celebration of the traditions and practices that help them collectively define and express their Aboriginal identity.

People in the group also talked about how they spent time with elders to learn about their Inuvialuit ancestry, tradition and language. The elders of the community fulfil an important role as leaders and teachers in the community; this role is evident in the grieving process as described by this woman:

I think what really pulls us together sometimes is when people are going through grieving. Not only the Inuvialuit but the community as a whole. A lot of times it is the majority of Inuvialuit and Gwichin that are going through this grieving and we have our elders to help the grieving family. And there are a lot of elders who have lost loved ones, they have gone through grieving themselves so they have experienced it. And us younger generation, some of us may have experienced grieving maybe five or ten years ago but the elders are always there because they have experience. And I think that is what pulls us together as a people and a community.

They are also advisors in many areas of community life:

[The elders] are always leaders, they are always there for support. For politics [one elder in group] is our leader. Even though sometimes he's not elected he's always called in. And for elders' gatherings when they want information [another elder in the circle] is one of our leaders.

One of the elders in the group was living proof of this important role in the life of the community; throughout the two-day learning circle he often became the authority on issues. He could usually offer a long-term historical analysis of any issue raised in the group, as he could tell stories told to him by elders in his youth who remembered very specific details of their first contact with non-Aboriginal people. A number of times throughout the two-day circle, other members expressed their faith in him as an effective leader of the Inuvialuit people.

The past: significant events, experiences, people, places

I think originally it was Indians from up the river that named us 'Eskimo'.

Because of the fact that they saw our people eating raw meat. So that's where the name originated from, Eskimo meaning a piece of raw meat. ...I eat raw meat, I had some raw meat last night! [laughs]

In both the youth and the adult Inuvialuit learning circle there was much talk about the term 'Eskimo' and how it came to be. The people in the circle referred to themselves as Inuvialuit and felt that the term Eskimo was a degrading misnomer that they resented. One elder said that in the eastern Arctic they use the term Inuit, in the Inuvik region they use Inuvialuit and in Alaska they use Inuviat, which all mean the same thing — the people.

Historically the Inuvialuit have been the victims of more than one absurd campaign to rename them for the sake of bureaucratic efficiency. For example,

We used to have a number. Like I was [first name] W. — W. would stand for west — 235. [Facilitator: Everybody?] ... Yup. That was how they identified us. ...In the eastern Arctic some of them even adopted them numbers as their last name. It didn't get that far here. You had a W for west, and a 3 for this region and two other numbers.

One of the men said these numbers were used until the early 1970s. Before the Canadian government decided to number all the people in order to make it easier to colonize them, the Inuvialuit were exposed to others — missionaries and trappers — who adopted a policy of giving them names that were easier for non-Aboriginal people to use. The intent was more than simply to make it easier to communicate with the northern peoples.

Well actually before the ministers and the White people came in here they gave them an Eskimo name. Like my mom would have only been known as [Inuvialuit name] in them days. And then when the missionaries came in they started giving everybody names. I know people who were baptised, given names, married and all their kids were baptised in the same day!

In this passage we get a glimpse of the astounding missionary zeal to further the reach of Christianity and the colonial assimilationist agenda.

More recently attempts have been made by Inuvialuit to reclaim the names that were taken away by missionaries and bureaucrats. The project was called Operation Surname:

I think something that affected a lot of our cultural identity was about fifteen or twenty years ago there was this Operation Surname which was a project run by my great uncle whose job was to go around and visit the Inuvialuit from this area and do a project with their surnames. Because a lot of us today have [non-Aboriginal] names... I guess when the white man came a long time ago the Inuvialuit had last names that were too hard for them... the white men weren't familiar with their names. So they gave them names like Allen, Joe, Dick —

names that are easy for white men to say. I guess the Inuvialuit adopted those names...and the same with the Gwich'in too... But there was Operation Surname which was a project that looked at the history to see [how things developed]... we were given the opportunity to find out what your real background and history of your family was. Through that Operation Surname I knew the name of my grandparents and great-grandparents. I had a choice to keep the name Allen or change it to my grandfather's Inuvialuit name. And a lot of Inuvialuit in the area have been given that opportunity.... It gave me a sense of belonging I guess. Who I was. At least I had a real name.

The project was an attempt to reverse the wrongs of the past, but for many people it offered too little, too late. Additionally, even for those who successfully traced and chose to reclaim their Aboriginal name, there were administrative problems:

Yeah, the other problems that came out of that were...my auntie lost her birth certificate and when we sent to get a new birth certificate they said they had nobody on record by her name. So Operation Surname changed her maiden name...according to the records they had...they didn't have her on file. So I had to write back and have her name changed again.

Many people experienced similar problems as a result of Operation Surname; for example, the administrators of the program spelled many of the names incorrectly, so people had to go back and change their names again, much like the woman in this last passage. These types of bureaucratic glitches are still happening with some Inuvialuit today. In the end one has to question how successful the program was when at least two of the members of the learning circle said they never knew about the numbers or about Operation Surname.

Historically, religious institutions had a large impact on the cultural identity of the Inuvialuit: "I think religion had a lot of negative things to do with our culture." Apart from the issue of names, there were the residential schools which represented a state-sanctioned attempt to obliterate the languages and cultural practices of all Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada. Some members of the circle had gone through the schools; this is what one woman had to say about her generation:

I think that's a big issue too because, like they said, you had to go to residential school and you couldn't speak your own language. You were punished if you spoke your own language. So that was a big issue.... They took away those skills that your parents were supposed to bring you up to know, like parenting skills. We lost all that because we were in an institution that didn't foster that kind of environment. There's a huge group of us who had to learn parenting [starts to laugh] 'shooting from the hip', because we didn't know how to parent.

Originally the residential school was in Aklavik, and later both the Anglican and Catholic churches set up schools in Inuvik. Then there were larger institutions later on in the 1960s in

Yellowknife and then in Fort Smith. How did the churches decide what denomination the people, who might not even have heard of Christianity, were?

And it was just who was able to contact your parents first [laughs] that determined your religious background.

Another man talked about his own residential school experience in the 1920s and 1930s, illustrating the similarities in his children's experiences living in the hostels:

There's an awful lot of people who have not [learned to live on the land at the bush camps] because even a long time ago they had the residential schools, this has been an argument for many years, because when they came students used to come from Cambridge Bay, Coppermine and other places. The only transportation they had when they were coming from places like that were on the mission boats or freight boats. And depending on the room they had on the boats and the ice conditions, some of them kids never went back for two or three years, they stayed right in Aklavik. Unfortunately in them days we weren't allowed to talk our own language when we were in residential schools. And a lot of these children, when they went to school...in the late 1920s and early '30s...where some of them would not get back home and they would lose everything between them and their parents. They don't know how to live off the land, they don't know how to speak the language when they came back. And therefore they really don't have anything in common. And even hostel days, when you went into the hostel [to go to school in the town]. I can remember one year when I put my two oldest into the hostel and we stayed out on the land. They were in there for ten months out of the year and before they went in there they could speak fluently in Inuvialuk but when they came back home for the summer they couldn't! And I can remember my oldest daughter come running up to me and saying, "Daddy don't ever put me in the hostel again!" And that's why I moved into Inuvik; I got a job and moved into Inuvik. A lot of these kids who have spent so much time in the residential schools and hostels and stuff like that sort of lose their identity. They don't know where they are, they're in between somewhere. They know a little bit about both lives but yet culturally they have not lived their own way of life.... We're talking about fifty years ago or so, a long time ago I guess. But of course in them days education didn't mean much to anybody. We, from this region, we would go to school in September and leave in March because it was more important for us to go out and learn how to live off the land than it was to get an education. And really the only reason our parents sent us to school in them days was to read and write — that was all, there was nothing else. Even then the teachers would teach us about what was happening in England, what was happening in Europe but we never got anything about our own culture. And we, the kids in the residential schools, did all the work. We cut all the wood, we carried all the water, we emptied the bathrooms, we did all the work! So it was really, at that time school was to learn to read and write and work.

Though the residential schools had many negative effects on the families, communities and the cultural practices of the Inuvialuit, some members of the learning circle did value the reading and writing skills they acquired at the schools.

Further, even though the participants in the circle expressed criticisms of the churches and residential schools, they also expressed an acceptance of the churches as, generally speaking, a positive part of their modern community. The main regret expressed by both elders and youth in the circle was that they felt less welcome in the churches because, for one, services were no longer translated into their languages. In the following passages an elder criticizes the churches (along with other institutions) for not providing services that are accessible to some Inuvialuit:

I was in Aklavik a couple of years ago and I spoke to an elder who told me she went to church for many years because they used to have lay readers that talked in their own language — both in the Gwichin and the Inuvialuit. Today they don't even have translations, not even in church! Because one of the things that I think people are beginning to say now is that it takes too much time! I've been to several meetings over the past couple of weeks and they said, "Well if your people are interested why aren't your elders here as well to listen in?" And I keep telling them, "Well, if I couldn't understand English I sure wouldn't be here either! Why come and sit at a meeting for three hours and get nothing out of it?" So I blame our churches as well for not [providing translation]... and this lady in Aklavik told me she hadn't gone to church for two years because she didn't understand anything that was being said. She could understand the words but a lot of time you can understand the words and not understand the meaning of it. So this is something in the past two years that we have really lost out on.

Religion and church I did draw a line saying it was positive but I've since changed, not because I don't think it was positive in the past but now seeing that we're losing a lot of it. Like our elders, not too many of them even go to church anymore because of the fact that they don't understand, it's not translated. It's not because they're not interested. I went to my camp a couple of weeks ago and my boys were just leaving to go out and look at their traps on Sunday. And I thought about how when I was a kid our elders would never allow us to go out and do anything on Sunday. If you were out trapping you took your traps out Saturday night, you rested on Sunday and then you went back on Monday. That was one of the things we had to follow. So I talked to my boys about it when I was out last time.

Though this man was the only elder in the circle who talked about these issues, he seemed to be a committed member of the church. Other members of the circle expressed similar feelings about the church; this woman told of her sense of loss because, in the past, the church was an important gathering place for her family:

I think another place that might have had an effect on cultural identity is the church... 'cause a long time ago people went to church together as families — with

their parents, children, grandparents. And they felt there was a feeling of togetherness there. And now today we don't see as many people going to the church. Whereas long ago it used to be almost part of the culture — depending on your religion — it was a big gathering every Sunday.

Here is one other example of how the church, at one time, seemed to integrate the Inuvialuit culture into its celebration; the story is told by the same man who spoke earlier about the lack of translation.

Years ago the church was always leaning towards the Aboriginal people because that's where their membership was. And I can remember up until Inuvik [was established] we used to have Rat Sunday. Every year we would have Rat Sunday. And that was the celebration of our thanksgiving. Like down south it's in October and we had our thanksgiving in June because that was the end of our year. In the summer time we did whaling and in the fall we did fishing and trapping through the winter and then muskrat season in the spring and the 15th of June was the end of our year. So that was brought in but I can remember going to church in Aklavik when there would be stacks and stacks of [musk]rats and people brought in and saved them just for that thanksgiving day. But now nobody tries to [do these things] anymore.

In general, then, the people in this circle seemed to be accepting of the place of the modern church but, like these two people, were expressing regret that more Inuvialuit and Gwichin people were not able to, or were not choosing to, take part in the gatherings.

One of the participants illustrated how the introduction of welfare in the early 1950s and the attempted relocation of Aklavik to the present site of Inuvik were indicative of the government's campaign to control and assimilate the Inuvialuit:

I think when I talk about government I talk about government in Ottawa a lot of the time because they were at us. They more or less told us what to do, what we could do, what we couldn't do. And no one ever really came up here.... I'm really disappointed sometimes because people around here seemed to be really having a problem and the government wanted everybody to get out... I remember that was 1951 and nobody knew what welfare was because nobody hardly ever received that kind of help. And the RCMP, I don't think they were the kind of people who could handle something like this. But in 1951 they went around town and kept saying to people, "If you want to go down town, you don't want to go out in the bush, here's a piece of paper just go to the Hudson's Bay [store] and get what you want with it — or what you need with it." Up to that time people didn't depend on things like that. But people didn't know it was welfare, it was a handout. They just assumed it was something they were entitled to because the RCMP was going around handing them out, that sort of thing. So my feeling has always been that it made a lot of people dependent on government. [Facilitator: So then government could start controlling what people did?] Well I think they pretty well controlled us. I was listening to the news not too long ago and they were talking about all the work that was done with the people around here, how Aklavik was supposed to be

moved over here. And I heard on the national news the other night how much work was supposedly done with the people around this area. And the government from Ottawa is working to get Aklavik moved over here. And I can remember vividly the time it was done, and none of us were talked to. They didn't go around talking to people to find out where would be the best place to move Aklavik to. And that's one of the reasons that Aklavik is now still the size it is because they wouldn't move to a place like this, they had a far better place than they would have here — although it floods every once in awhile. [big grin] I mean you take a few weeks out of the spring for a hard time when it's flooding and the rest of the year you have a good time. You can catch all the fish you want. The caribou haven't been all that good the last couple of years but they have all kinds of fish, they have rabbits, they have everything there. So why move to a place like this? Though this campaign was not entirely successful, there were other events — nationally and internationally — that helped remove people from the land. Once people were more dependent on a welfare income, the government could use their need to advance assimilation:

Years ago they used to take the family allowance away if they didn't send their kids to school. So that was like a major factor in family breakup because that was the government's way of getting our parents to put us in residential schools. Long before the introduction of welfare, the fur trade and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) were two other significant forces from the past that affected the Aboriginal identity of the people in the circle. This person is speaking about the HBC:

It drew people to centres because they had to come here to trade. And they set up initially a barter system and later they used loans. They made people dependent on them for a lot of things.... [Facilitator: So it was a negative force?] ...it depends on where you're looking at it from. If they just came in and got their supplies and went back that was positive because it made it easier for them to live. This woman seemed to be implying that the centres could also be a negative force in the lives of some people who ended up staying as a result of the dependence they developed on the stores, thus marking the deterioration of traditional lifestyles. Today the European market for fur is all but devastated thanks to anti-fur environmental campaigns (more about this issue in the next section). This man described the ironic source of his frustration:

It was the Europeans who brought in the leghold trap into this country and taught us how to use it. And now they are the ones who are taking it away from us! With the end of the fur industry, many Inuvialuit had to move to urban centres to seek another source of sustenance.

Though it certainly had some negative effects on the Aboriginal identity of the Inuvialuit, the oil boom was an important time economically for the community of Inuvik. The boom began in the late 1970s and lasted about 15 years — in 1988 the bust began. When the members of the

circle spoke of the boom at its peak they expressed disbelief at the wages they were earning — "Equivalent to Mulroney I guess!" — and the economic power it afforded them personally:

And they had...really good benefits. My husband used to...be able to come out on their planes and visit every two weeks and then [with a look of disbelief] get expenses in addition to his cheque! I mean [laughs nervously] we were really living in style.

From another woman:

We're talking about 5 weeks out and you could go on holidays. For a week, ten days. Just travelling and getting anything you want. I mean that's the way some people do it.

A lot of people made a lot of money for a short time and then there was a bust and nothing was left. Many of the former employees and their families were devastated:

No jobs and depression! I felt the depression when they left. My husband used to work in the oil companies and he made good money. It was really hard.

It was really hard for families because you had to continue to try raising your family and then you had to try to be with your husband not having a job, feeling insecure about his future.

The facilitator asked the group whether they thought the companies would return to Inuvik, prompting one of the younger women in the group to sum up the boom and bust this way:

I think it would be very hard for them to come back because of their absence for so many years. I think that the people who used to work for them have other jobs or other interests.... I think when the oil company was here, especially in Tuk because the oil field was right in Tuk...whenever you walked down a few streets in Tuk just about every second house had ski-doo's, cars and trucks. So you knew who worked for the oil companies because they had these things. They took the place of the dog teams, of the hunting... [Now] there's a lot of unemployment, people are going back to school. They're starting to take more control of their families — so that's the good side of the oil companies staying away. But the bad side is, I guess, no jobs for those that want them. No money.

Many of the businesses that opened during the oil boom are no longer in existence.

However, as this woman stated, the economic bust has forced people to examine their lives and set out in new directions that will benefit themselves and their families and community. Many have gone back to school or are upgrading their skills to help them face the challenges of the modern economy.

Before the oil boom, the building of the town of Inuvik and the DEW line (the Distant Early Warning radar system, built in the mid-1950s) had similar effects on the community and the Aboriginal identity of the Inuvialuit. This elder clearly articulated the long-term historical

and cultural effects of these events:

Things started with the building of Inuvik and the DEW line. That was just before the oil companies came in. People, when they were building the DEW line and Inuvik was being built, they could go and get a job on the DEW line and if they didn't like that they could come back to Inuvik and work. And this lasted for a number of years. At that time there was no shortage of jobs, you could...get a job any time you wanted. In fact this was the first time I ever worked for wages, I worked when construction was going on here. But people left their trap lines because this work was year round and at that time people were still using dog teams so people didn't have time to look after their dogs so they got rid of them. And when the first bust came, when the DEW line and Inuvik were finished, these people, not knowing how to put money in the bank and how to save money for a rainy day, didn't have anything to get back out on the land with. And...we had hoped people would learn a lesson from this boom and bust thing because this is not the first time the oil companies have sort of gone really high and went down and then came back up again. Now it's back down to just about nothing. We're a little bit optimistic and maybe it will come back again in another couple of years but this is...you know with pressure from the oil market [fluctuations]... [shakes head, resigned] ...maybe our grandchildren [will see some benefit].

By the time these two sources of work were no longer available, a new generation of youth had grown up, and the life they knew was primarily life in the city; though they would spend holidays and weekends in the bush with their parents, the adults had essentially given up their livelihood on the land.

The 1984 land claim settlement was another significant event from the past that affected the cultural identity of the Inuvialuit. For the most part it has given them greater control over their traditional lands and their hunting, fishing and trapping rights. This man tells about how the land claims process began in the 1960s when the people realized that the oil companies were drilling tests in their backyards without their permission. COPE (Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement) was formed and spearheaded the land claim in order to give the Inuvialuit more control over such developments.

Barriers: diminishment and denial of cultural identity

The members of the circle told the Royal Commission that the main expression of their traditional culture is to live and work on the land — hunting, trapping, whaling and fishing. There are many forces in opposition to the choice of living on the land; for example, the international fur market has been devastated by environmental and animal rights protest groups:

The biggest impact was Greenpeace. That was our biggest impact. Even when I worked for the oil companies I'd only work in the summer time. In the winter I used to trap. Then Greenpeace came. The muskrat was about \$13 top price at one time. A lot of us quit the oil patch just to go back on the land. But after that [the arrival of Greenpeace] we had to go back to the oil patch.

The price of a muskrat pelt has fallen from \$13 in the early 1980s to less than 80 cents today — "If you're lucky!" In practical terms, if people want to live on the land they have to have a livelihood in the city to pay for the gasoline and other supplies needed to live in the bush, because trapping simply doesn't pay enough any more. This elder told of his experience:

The other thing that comes to mind is our fur markets. I have a son who stays out at our camp the year round, a friend of his stays with him. And I have to work and try and make money to try and make sure he's got gas. He phoned last night to say he was just about out and now I've got to find gas to get out there because we planned on staying out there too. But he's caught some furs this winter... but for the prices we get for our fur, it's absolutely impossible for him to even pay for the amount of gas he's used over the winter. So that runs into a problem because a lot of people right now who are working probably wouldn't be working if they could make a living off the land.... it's forced people to move [into town].

This phenomenon, among others, has driven many to the city to live and work, going to the bush only on weekends and during holidays, which may or may not coincide with hunting seasons.

The institutions that are at the core of the economic activity of Inuvik, the government and businesses, are the main source of livelihood for the people living in the community. Some of the people who spoke in the Inuvialuit learning circle were clearly feeling oppressed by the nine-to-five work ethic of most employers in Inuvik:

When you are in the workplace too. You feel as though you are in jail from 8 to 5. If you had to work every day of the year...I don't know how I'd do it. Just like I feel locked up inside with where I have to be. It's just like you're cooped up.... especially in spring time.

The members of the group gave a number of examples of how these institutions, regardless of who owns or runs them, are based on non-Aboriginal standards of operation, which are often in direct conflict with the expression of their Aboriginal cultural identity. The following exchange illustrates this point:

I feel that we are always having to live the non-Inuvialuit standard of the white man... like some of them have dress codes, like you have to dress a certain way. And you have to speak a certain way — otherwise they consider you odd or something.... [Facilitator: Would you say you feel like that at your home?] No, just outside the home. Like I'm the clerk/receptionist here [in this building]... [Facilitator: Is it run with Inuvialuit values?] ...no, white values. Like if you wanted to go out on the land at a certain time of year, you can't. You have to be in

the office, that's their standard way. [Facilitator: Are these Inuvialuit who make the rules?] ...no, they are white people. I wouldn't mind to go out on the land...[for example, at] muskrat hunting time. They say you have to stay in the office. [Facilitator: When I came in I saw a sign that said "Inuvialuit Development Corporation". Are you saying it is run by non-Inuvialuit?] ...no, it's run by Inuvialuit but they use the non-Inuvialuit standard way.

To this another woman added:

I think mostly, the governing boards are made up of Inuvialuit people but the administration of the office is non-Inuvialuit... the non-Inuvialuit are the ones who administer the office, therefore they become the bosses or whatever and you have to follow [their rules]... So this is part of a style of management. You are working for them so you have to be in the office at a certain time and you can't leave any time you want to and you can't take your holidays anytime you want to.

Even though the makeup [of the government] has a majority of Aboriginal people you still have to consider that the structures that are underneath them are very much non-Aboriginal... the structures that were there before they came on are still there... the bureaucracy. A lot of the directives and the policy setting was done through the use of these people. So it's again very much an institutional issue where you have to change the whole system and not just...the cosmetics of it — what the make up is.

One of the other women in the group held a government management position; she told the story from her perspective:

Trying to make changes so that you reflect the Inuvialuit perspective but you have to try and make those changes within the guidelines that are set by a foreign body — like the government. And it's not necessarily the way [we would do it]... even this morning...this whole greeting exercise [used in the RCAP learning circle] — that's foreign to us! ...it may be something brought in from the south...from southern Natives. And to us, that's not necessarily what we do...you know, we go around and shake hands and stuff but we're trying to fit into somebody else's guidelines even though we want to change the format so it is more reflective of us. [Facilitator: What would you do?] I would like to say what I would like to do but so many times in senior management you are dealing with maybe one or two Aboriginal people and then the rest of the organization is non-Aboriginal. So there are still barriers there, even though you want to make changes. And if it were three-quarters Aboriginal you could take that perspective, set your own guidelines and make the changes. [Facilitator: And you feel that is forced on you?] ...Oh, very much!

This woman felt a similar sort of disempowerment:

For me it's working with the non-Native people around me. Like I'm working at the high school and I'm the only Inuvialuit that works there. And if I go to a meeting it is all non-Native except for me and a Gwich'in person. And I feel so low, or so small in comparison to sitting in here. I feel stronger in here. And I don't talk the same way as they do.

As well, within non-Aboriginal educational institutions there was, in the past, a complete

denial of accurate historical information about the Inuvialuit and, in general, absolutely no culturally relevant curriculum. One of the group members said:

The education curriculum does not allow or recognize Aboriginal culture and language as much as it should be in the school. Instead of learning about the explorers from long ago...they should have more northern history.

Without relevant curriculum the students don't engage in the learning process; they would rather be doing something that is more relevant to their lives. One young man in the group told of his experiences in the school:

I stayed out in the bush most of my life. I was in school for a couple of years and I left when I was seven. Stayed out until about two years ago and then I came back. I went to upgrading for about a year and a half but I couldn't get it. ...it was hard to try and go to school after staying out there so long. But I would rather be out there than in here. [Facilitator: Is it like they said, hard to stay in a building all day and learn things that don't seem to have any importance?][big smile and nodding in agreement]...yeah, that's it.

Not all young people spent this much of their lives in the bush, but most of them expressed a desire to spend more time on the land learning about and strengthening their Aboriginal identity. Given the political will, the school curriculum could easily make room for more Inuvialuit language, culture, history and outdoor education using elders and other community members in the process. For so many years there was no acknowledgement of these important cultural teachings, but this is beginning to change. One man gave an example of exactly how change can take place if there is a majority of Aboriginal people in the community and how they are fighting to make similar changes in the institutions (education in this example) in Inuvik.

The other thing is that in the other smaller communities where there is a majority Gwich'in or a majority Inuvialuit they have the power to change the school year. They leave school in May and come back in August. Here, in the '60s, we were trying to change the school year so that our kids could go out on the land with us. But the argument we got back from the government was no we couldn't do that because there was almost as many white children in the school as there was Aboriginal children. So therefore it would disrupt their school year if we got our way. So in that way we could never change the school year here. ...I think the schools are getting programs where people can take kids out on the land. I know I'm on a committee now to see what we can do about taking kids out. So, I think it's taken many many years but I think we are overcoming some of these situations.

The Inuvialuit are making other inroads as well:

It's coming into the schools now but when we were going to school we learned a lot about the explorers who explored the North and a lot of the schools are named

after explorers or our rivers and oceans are named after explorers. And that's the kind of history that we were learning in the '60s and '70s. Now in the '80s and '90s the government is starting to feel sorry for us or something and say, "Well geez, times have to change." And that's where our history is starting to come into the school system now. It's really through language, through social studies; their curriculum is starting to change a bit now because of the comments, I'm sure, from people in the community who said that history has to be part of the curriculum.

Here is another example of how individuals are beginning to adapt the school to their own needs:

I've been taking members of my family...out to the camp with me. This is something I've fought on my own, but what I do is talk to the principal and I assure him that if they send homework with my daughter that I'll make sure she gets it done. I made arrangements to take her out for three weeks this morning. ...she's in grade four. But this [might not work] with a child in high school because I couldn't assist them in doing their homework.

Though they are a positive sign, these types of changes have come only after a long battle with schools. Other people in the circle discussed how their mainstream education played a role in diminishing their cultural identity. For the most part, as one man stated, going to school in town meant leaving the land and taking time away from learning important traditions of the Inuvialuit. Further, much like the residential school system, if the family didn't live in the town their children had to live in a hostel in Inuvik for ten months of the year while they went to school. Given the choice between splitting up the family and working on the land, some parents simply moved into the town so that their children could live at home during the school year. As a result, the whole family was dislodged from their traditional lifestyle to seek employment in town. In recent years the oil fields offered much of the employment around Inuvik, Aklavik and Tuktoyaktuk. Some families simply kept their children out of the schools in defiance of government authorities.

The education system is not the only government institution that is a barrier to Inuvialuit cultural identity. Members of the group also noted that the social welfare system has created institutional dependency and familial division where once people relied on their extended family and community for the same support:

In some ways they have taught you to become dependent on the system through family counselling or social assistance or child welfare, whatever the case may be.... You were dependent on extended families a long time ago to care for your children if you were in need or whatever.... Some of the senior staff or the workers don't understand your cultural background and your ties to your family

and your community. A lot of times they break your family apart by taking your children away or separating you from your community, your people.

Additionally, the justice system is an alien and difficult experience for some people in the community, and the health care system has also had significant effects on people's Aboriginal identity:

I think the hospitals too have had a large impact on cultural identity because there are a lot of people from the territories and I've talked to people down south that spent years and years in the hospital. And when they were finally released they didn't know their family, they didn't know their language, they had a hard time relating to their community. And they had to get back there and try to live.

People are flown to larger southern hospitals for more serious health problems, as services are limited in Inuvik.

The group members also stated that alcohol had a huge impact on the Inuvialuit. One young man in the circle seemed extremely hurt and angry about the effect alcohol has had on his life. When he spoke his facial expressions often exposed his resentment, mixed with pain and disgust. When asked by the facilitator how it affected him the most, he said,

Family! Love and caring, it wasn't there any more. All they turned on was alcohol.... It was mostly my older brother who watched me, he was like a mom and a dad to me! And when he died I almost completely lost everything! I didn't really care for my parents, I didn't really care for my sisters and brothers.

[Facilitator: That's where the anger came in? He nods in agreement.] Until my parents stopped drinking. They still try and make it up to me but I still mostly blame them for the alcohol and I never bother to say nothing to my mom or dad.

[Facilitator: Does this affect other families in Tuk?] Yeah! A lot of people. It's all you see mostly every weekend when you go there. It even has a lot of effect on teenagers.

There is no doubt that alcohol abuse is a problem for many people — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal — in this northern town. One of the elders in the circle remembered the early days of alcohol and here he reflects on the government's role in dealing with the problem:

I used to hear stories about canned heat and stuff like that. Alcohol has had a really big impact on us. I talked about it just the other day in a workshop and it's something that I feel we really don't talk enough about...and I think the government knew all along that alcohol was going to be opened up to the Native people. But there was never anything done about it and I can remember, I forget the year, but one July morning I was listening to the national news and they said that alcohol was open to all Native people across Canada. And the reason I say I think the government knew all along that this was going to happen but they never had any training, nothing in place to do it. Twenty years later after the problems really got ahold of people then they started looking at how can we deal with this. I was in an alcohol workshop yesterday, and I've heard this mentioned many times

before, I had a lady say, "I feel like going down and burning down the liquor store!" But the government would only come back and put in another liquor store tomorrow. Where if a school burned down it might take you a heck of a long time to replace that school.... [Liquor is more important] to the government because they have revenue. Although I think they use a small portion on alcohol addiction programs and stuff like that but to me it's a very small portion.

For Aboriginal people alcoholism is often a symptom of the depression and despair that are the result of generations of colonialism, marginalization, racism and oppression. The detestation of alcohol and drug addiction continues to wage a heavy toll on individuals (like the man who spoke above), families and entire communities.

Gambling and television have a similar effect. In the Inuvialuit youth group the young people said their parents would gamble into the night and for days on end — at times losing large amounts of money. Some of the adults, though they agreed its impact was mostly negative, felt gambling was a way to fight boredom and a place to socialize:

I know it's come up before in conversation, but I mean what else have you really got to do? We're all saying people go there and they stay too long. But an awful lot of these people also when they are playing oko for money, it is also a social time that runs into the wee hours of the morning...[laughs]...It's a good pastime [laughs].

The youth were much more verbal about their opposition to gambling and the effects it had on them. One man also talked about bingo as a problem in the town:

It really disappoints that there are bingo games. I guess all over the country the bingo is the main source of raising money. But I have a real problem with it sometimes because you know when they are going to put on a bingo they look at what time people are going to get paid, they look at when people are going to get their pension cheques and that's the time they (plan a game). Just before Christmas they send the cheques out early, everybody gets their old age pension, you get your family allowance; so there's usually always a \$10,000 bingo right around that time. And the bingo games up here are not supported by the rich people or the people who can afford it, it's always supported by the people who feel they have a chance to win some bucks.

Both gambling and alcohol abuse are damaging to the well-being of the Inuvialuit community in Inuvik. Beyond the potential destruction or neglect of important relationships, these phenomena also contribute to poverty.

One of the men also felt that television had a similar kind of effect on relationships and some important Aboriginal cultural practices:

Next to alcohol it has a bigger impact than anything else because in our culture...family visiting was something that we always did. And unfortunately with TV, there's no way my wife could shut off the TV when "All My Children" is

on. [laughs] Sometimes you have people visiting and maybe the kids are watching a program they want to watch, and TV is always in the way. Maybe some of it might be educational, I like watching the news, but sometimes the news is kind of boring. Sometimes I just turn it to something else.

Television also has the potential to be an important tool for education, and some people in the group said they liked the programming offered by their own communications network — ICS (Inuvialuit Communications Society) — namely, culturally relevant and informative, accurate, educational programs about northern and Aboriginal people. This type of programming is only beginning to develop though. Group members also informed the Royal Commission that they did not like the old stereotypes of Aboriginal people that have characterized television programming in the past.

Lastly, racism is a major barrier to the expression of cultural identity for the Inuvialuit; it is a phenomenon that fuels the denial of access to important cultural resources and it is a source of oppression and shame that diminishes the pride and esteem that are necessary to sustain and develop healthy identity formation. The members of the circle spoke of racism as a given part of their world, it touches all areas — personal and institutional — of daily life: employment, education, social life, commerce, government institutions and police. At times it is felt in subtle ways:

There is also a communication gap between the non-Natives and the Natives and it makes you feel like you're [lower]... Like maybe some non-Native people think like, "These are Native people and we have to speak to them at a lower level...talk down to them." Like their waves aren't the same level as ours. They talk to you like you don't understand.

At other times it is more violent:

Sometimes when you go to the bar and you're trying to sit down and have a good time. These inebriated people come along and start getting smart, they say, "You're nothing but a dirty Eskimo!" or "You're nothing but a black Indian!" A lot of comments like that come out of bars. And some people get offended by those type of comments.

One of the women told the group how racism touches her life. In the next passage she gives an example of how, at her place of employment, one person's racist attitudes touch many people's lives:

Anywhere! It's happened to me at work...anywhere, social gatherings...from non-Aboriginal people. And this comes from just one non-Aboriginal person, they can do a lot of damage to you — just one non-Aboriginal person. Even if you work in an Aboriginal place where most of the employees are Aboriginal.

The group also talked about how some of the Inuvialuit have internalized the racist

messages they have experienced and, in turn, directed them to other members of their Aboriginal community.

Empowerment: cultural identity strengthened and enhanced

For the Inuvialuit, empowerment is felt most consistently when they can live freely on the land — hunting, trapping, fishing, whaling, harvesting and preparing traditional foods. Throughout the two days of the learning circle and also during the youth circle, the fundamental place of the land in their Aboriginal identity was expressed repeatedly. Most of the barriers they talked about were factors that deny them the right to live on the land. The events from the past that stand out as times of despair, sadness and loss are the points in their history when their livelihood on the land had deteriorated — the decline of the fur trade, for example. It is on the land that important lessons are learned, lessons that are central to the Inuvialuit world view — teaching the youth is a vital role that adults in this circle said reinforce their own identity. It is also on the land that families grow together, where children learn the language and traditions of their ancestors — "Driving my four dogs!". And it is on the land that people of the Inuvialuit community come together to celebrate and to grieve. Their ancient songs, dances and stories are about their relationship to each other, to the land and animals. People spoke of specific places that were important to them individually, as families (the location of bush camps, for example) and as a community (the entire MacKenzie River delta region). This man told a haunting story about a place that strengthened him:

I would like to mention where my ancestors came from. It's a place called...Kikigaluit [phonetic spelling], a place at the mouth of the MacKenzie River near the Beaufort Sea. This is a place where, I've talked to many people, my mother was born and grew up. I've learned about how they used to do their whaling many years ago with kayaks. I've talked with many people who have actually lived there — my mother was one of them. I think this strengthens me because I know where we came from and unfortunately sometime in the early 1900s they had a flu epidemic there when the white people started coming into the north and travelling along the coast. I remember people telling me stories about when people got sick, they would be working on a whale or cutting and drying fish and all of a sudden they'd get sick and they'd go up and lie down and that would be the end of it. Out of somewhere between two and three thousand people, they eventually got down to three hundred. And they could not look after all their dead so they had to move away from there because of the stench. That's when Tuktoyaktuk was born, because the people had to move away from there. And I've talked to elders who've told me that when the wind was blowing in the right

direction — and that's about twenty miles from Tuk — when the wind was blowing in the right direction they could still smell the stench from dead bodies. And I think this strengthens me because my mom told me many of these stories and I've sat with elders and listened to many more about when the missionaries first came. While he was telling this horrifying story the room was completely still, and though it tells of atrocity, the man still drew strength from the way it connected him to his ancestors and the land. This is a vivid illustration of the relationship between the people and the land; it also exemplifies the importance of the oral traditions and the place of the elders as the record keepers of the community.

It is no surprise that the land claim is something else that strengthens the Inuvialuit sense of identity, in that it protects their access to important cultural practices. This man, a respected elder in the group and the community, illuminates the importance of the land claim based on teachings from his elders:

The land is an interesting one.... it is positive but when you consider some of the things happening today...I think the reason we do have a land claim now, when we first started talking about getting a land claim in the late 1960s, our elders at that time, who are mostly gone now, made sure they made us young people understand and they always told us: "The land has looked after us for many generations because we have looked after the land and the animals on it." And that's why I mention whenever I can that we are among the most conservation-minded people in the world, when it comes to conserving our animals. And one thing our elders told us is this: "Our land has looked after us for many generations and if you people take it upon yourself to take care of the land, the land can also look after you for many generations."

Given the competing interests of business and government, the land claim gives the Inuvialuit some power to protect their livelihood and, accordingly, sustain their cultural identity.

The elders are, in many respects, one of the most important community resources of the Inuvialuit. They are storehouses of history and cultural tradition. They are the experts on a range of important issues that are central to the identity of the community, and they take their role as teachers of youth very seriously. The elders are rooted in the past, yet they also have a significant role as leaders and visionaries for the future.

In addition to the other aspects that have strengthened their Aboriginal identity the group members also discussed the following points: the Northern Games; jamborees; workshops; artists; writers; drum dancing; square dancing and jigging; friendship centres; Inuvialuit Communications Society and the production of other culturally relevant media — TV, radio, print; and having Inuvialuit teachers in the school.

Comparison of two communities: Aboriginal and mainstream

Here are some highlights of the circle representations drawn by the Inuvialuit when asked to depict the most influential relationships in the Aboriginal and mainstream communities as they affect their cultural identity:

Mainstream	Aboriginal
education/residential school: deprivation of culture and family (-); obtaining useful knowledge and skills for employment and community development (+); inaccurate or stereotypical (-); accurate and authentic (+)	education/residential school: deprivation of culture and family (-); racism (-); obtaining knowledge and skills for employment and community development (+); insufficiently serviced at local level (-); inaccurate and culturally irrelevant curriculum (-); changes to reflect needs of Inuvialuit community, e.g., language class (+)
gambling (-)	elders (+)
bars, alcohol, drugs, addictions (-)	land/land claim: as source of life and sustenance (+); as source of conflict with government and business (-)
commercial foods: convenient (+); expensive (-); contribute to declining use of traditional foods in community (-)	Language: learning and teaching it (+); denial and lack of access to (-)
work: to support family (+); racism, discrimination, prejudice (-); lack of access to (-); detracting from time on land (-)	bush camp (+); lack of access to (-)
media: culturally relevant (+); violence on TV (-); racism and stereotyped representations (-)	church: unifying for family (+); no Inuvialuktun translation for elders who wish to attend (-)
bills/living expenses (-)	justice system, jail (-)
jail (-)	family: largest influence (+)
social services: support (+); dependence (-); removal of children (-)	whaling, fishing, hunting and trapping (+)
political conflicts (-)	government: supportive in some capacities (+); source of employment (+); control and conflicting with Aboriginal values and lifestyles, e.g., dress code, structure, operating procedures (-); racism (-)
AIDS (-)	traditional skills, activities, food: drum dancing, sewing, survival on the land, dog teams (+)
recreation (+); lack of variety (-)	community: as support (+); in conflict (-)

To describe how the two communities are integrated, or not, it may be helpful to examine the theme of leadership in the community. Essentially, there are two types of leaders for the Inuvialuit: the traditional leaders and the modern educated leaders. Both are chosen from the community based on their commitment to and knowledge of the issues of importance (business, political, spiritual, social) for the Inuvialuit. Here is a passage from one man's description of the leadership dynamic:

From generation to generation the Inuvialuit have always had leaders. They never had such a thing as elections but they would pick the most respected person in the community, where ever it was. They usually picked a person who was a good hunter, a good supplier to his family, and respected by the community where he was always doing things for people. He would be considered a leader. But they always had elders to advise them. And this is something that we had, we never had a riding system, they are things that are passed on from generation to generation. Not all of them but some of them even come out in the songs and dances. [Facilitator: Are these the people who are elected or is it different now?] Oh, it's different now...years ago you didn't look for [the same things], you looked for people who had experience on the land. Today you are looking for people who can deal with government and other organizations. Or you're looking more for education than you are of traditional knowledge.

Here is another description of leadership qualities:

To be a leader, sure you can have the education, but to know your people's need you have to have the traditions — traditional lives — as the background of the people. 'Cause you wouldn't listen to what they were saying if you don't have the same feeling as they have.... [Otherwise] you could just live by the white man way of living, you know, running the organization. There's lot of them, I don't like the way some of the organizations are run and yet we don't have a voice in there! Because we can't relate to the people who are sitting on the leadership.

This point was made over and over in the group: you can't advocate for your people if you aren't part of the culture, but there has to be a balance of the traditional and the modern. Common sense was another ingredient that helped integrate the two approaches: "If you have a good education and you don't have any common sense your education is not worth too much." From the traditional perspective, the place of the elders was faithfully valued for consultation, support and direction:

[The elders] are always leaders, they are always there for support. For politics, [one elder in the group] is our leader. Even though sometimes he's not elected he's always called in. And for elders gatherings when they want information, [another elder in the circle] is one of our leaders.

Some leaders do [fulfil their role well]. [The first elder mentioned] does. He makes me feel good when he sits on the boards because I know he's going to

speak on my behalf. Not me myself alone but for the Inuvialuit, whatever they say
 he speaks up for them.

By contrast, group members said, some politicians speak on behalf of the Inuvialuit but not from the heart, only superficially, because they are not truly connected to the people's needs. Further, in the process of integrating the old with the new some tensions inevitably surface from time to time. All the elders in the circle could identify with this man's experience:

 I think it happens a little bit among our own Aboriginal people. I had a young lady working for me one time and she made a decision that turned out not to be the right decision. And when you're working sometimes you get criticism, like the elders sometimes get criticism because they don't have an education. Some people think it means a lot more to make a decision if you are educated. Well I have not been through the education system but this young lady who I had working for me, she went ahead and made a decision that was a wrong decision. And I had to call her into the office and talk to her about it. And she said, "I didn't feel that I should talk to you because I've been through the education system and you haven't." So she figured that because she went through school, she went to university, she was in a better position than I was to make a proper decision. Where from practical experience I would have made the proper decision. So in some ways we still get criticized, not an awful lot but once in awhile. Because the feeling is that we're not educated enough to make decisions.

In his wisdom this man knew the value of and need for both approaches to maximize the effectiveness of Inuvialuit community institutions. He spoke of trying to teach the younger, more educated people and to use their skills in conjunction with the elders for the benefit of the whole community. It is a sharing process that is necessary for the well-being of everyone, as the elders too have their limitations:

 It's not necessarily a bad thing [education]... I am the chair of our hunters and trappers committee which is just a small thing and I'm getting the chair of the community corporation which is for the community of Inuvik itself. But I don't think I could take on the responsibility of running the whole organization with the kind of education I have. Like with...our leading organization, I would never think of running it because I don't have the qualities to do it. I need my education.

Leadership is central to the Inuvialuit community as it confronts the modern demands of the mainstream population.

 Though we have focused on the process of leadership that is evolving within the Inuvialuit community — in its attempts to use to the fullest extent the human resources it has — there is a parallel process between the two communities. Here is one example of how, in the process of change, technology from both communities is combined to maximize the understanding for both parties:

These things are changing a bit. I've been working with different government people over the years, particularly with the department of fisheries and oceans and with renewable resources. And we've been, with the hunters and trappers committee, harping about scientists coming in and doing research in the North here and not really taking into consideration traditional knowledge. But there is a switch in research on fish and hopefully some other things where we're using our traditional knowledge and the scientific knowledge to come up with the report. I just talked to someone this morning who said a person was coming up with his report to show us before he put it out so we're getting a little bit more co-operation.

Similar changes, however slow, are taking place in the school system (see previous section) where the curriculum is changing in a way that will inevitably give all students a more complete understanding of the culture and history of northern peoples in Canada.

Still, change is slow, and many members of the circle said they felt alienated from the mainstream community and the non-Aboriginal value system. After experiencing generations of racism, poverty, inaccessibility and marginalization they are understandably apprehensive about the meeting of the two cultures.

Recommendations

We, the Inuvialuit, recommend

1. That the traditional and the mainstream-educated leaders, along with the elders, develop an accurate historical account of our people. This information is to be for our local education system first and then shared with other Aboriginal nations. Next, the information would be distributed for use in the Canadian mainstream education system at all levels. Finally, the information could be distributed internationally for the same purposes.
2. That our people be officially recognized as Inuvialuit and not Inuit, which is a term that refers to a nation of Aboriginal people living in the eastern Arctic regions of Canada.
3. That in the self-government process, leaders be chosen based on tradition and cultural practices. For example, traditionally the leaders in Inuvialuit communities were good hunters, they were good providers for their families and they were respected in the community by the people living there. Additionally, they used the elders as their advisers and they listened to and understood their people's needs. Given all these qualities the people valued and respected their decisions.
4. That Aboriginal people whose lifestyle promotes sobriety be recruited, trained and hired in the community. These people would develop community education programs that teach people about the effects of alcohol on the individual, the family and the community.

5. That a consistent and effective forum be set up between the government and the Inuvialuit to keep the Inuvialuit informed of all laws and decisions (made by government and/or business) that affect the Inuvialuit, their lands, their livelihood, the animals and their communities.
6. That traditional activities for youth of all ages be promoted more effectively (for example, Northern Games, drum dancing, storytelling, workshops, square dancing, jigging, string games, access to bush camps).
7. That more northern Aboriginal educators be recruited, trained and hired in order to develop more culturally relevant curriculum for the school system. And, that training programs be established in the community to prepare and encourage Inuvialuit to seek professional career paths (such as social workers, counsellors, economic development).
8. That small business using elders, crafts people, artists, writers, etc. be promoted in order to boost employment and economic development within the community.
9. That Inuvialuktun (the language of the Inuvialuit) be developed to the point that it becomes the primary language for daily use in the community, with English being the second language. In addition, new Inuvialuktun terminology be developed by elders and local resource people to reflect changes in the cultural landscape.
10. That more learning circles, similar to the Royal Commission study on cultural identity, be used throughout Canada in Aboriginal communities.

Conclusion

Throughout the Inuvialuit learning circle we saw repeatedly the important place that the elders have in this community. This dynamic is evident, first, in the comments that people make about the different ways they value the elders in the community. Second, it is evident, in the case of one elder in the circle, how much of the history and lessons of the culture are presented orally in the form of stories and remembrances. The information is rooted in the wealth of experience from this man's long life and from the stories he was told by his elders as a youth. The place of respect he held in the group was evident simply by the undivided attention he was given in the group as people listened intently each time he spoke.

In the Inuvialuit circle the importance of living on the land as a theme central to identity seemed to be expressed more consistently or perhaps more powerfully than in other learning circles. There is no doubt that most Aboriginal people who took part in the many learning circles valued the land as central to their lives, but there was a difference — perhaps because all the other groups, except for the Inuvialuit youth, were held in large southern urban centres, where some

people may have been more removed from a life on the land. One must remember how remote Inuvik is. Further, of the population base in the town approximately half the people have Aboriginal ancestry; this means that there are enough Aboriginal people to affect the institutions and power relationships in the town significantly. The people in this circle, though often frustrated, did display a realistic hope that they could have an impact on important institutions that affect their lives. For example, in the school system they have language classes and are optimistic that there will be further significant changes in the curriculum that more accurately reflect their Aboriginal ancestry.

Halifax Elders Learning Circle

Ten participants took part in the Halifax elders' learning circle; all were women. (One man took part for only a few minutes in the middle of day one.) Their ages ranged from early 40s to mid-70s. The women came from the following nations: Cree, Mi'kmaq, Inuit and Innu. Many of the women still spoke their Aboriginal language (six of the ten) and most of them had lived outside what they considered to be their Aboriginal community for much of their lives. The group was held at the Micmac Friendship Centre in downtown Halifax.

The present: core elements of cultural identity

There were many identifiable core elements that the group formulated together. This woman brought together some important concepts:

When you look at the Aboriginal peoples right across the country, each one of us has different languages and yet we still identify as a whole as an Aboriginal because of the particular customs that we have: the belief in that each and every one of us is unique and yet as a group we all share the same custom. The family is important, the traditions, the oral histories passed down from generation to generation, the belief that I was brought up in was, am I my brother's keeper — yes! — we are all there to help each other... [We are all connected]...yes, all of us! And this is what I believe in and this is what I was brought up to believe... Not just your Aboriginal community but the non-Native community as well. Because they are now coming to us for knowledge and light. They are now beginning to understand that the Indian is not a savage. That was a perception that they had because they didn't understand what we were trying to do. That each one of us was responsible for each other — sharing, the beliefs... To me material things were not very important; it is only in the western culture that I began to become aware that I am such a poor person in material things. But then in my culture that was not very important, it was important that you cared for each other, that you had

good health, good life, a belief in a great Creator, each and every one of us was part of that creation. The animals, the air that you breath, the birds, everything in there is in harmony with nature and this is what we are.

Together the elders generated a list of other important aspects of what they believe to be central to their Aboriginal identity. Their list included mother earth, relationship to the land, harmony with nature, trapping, fishing, language, the beliefs and customs passed down from generation to generation, being loving and kind and good to one another, faith, teaching in a kind and gentle way, belief in a Creator or Great Spirit, Native spirituality, stories, ritual and ceremony (e.g., around death, birth, marriage, naming children), the importance of all family, guidance of elders, respect for all people, respect for cultures — Aboriginal and others, the importance of the next seven generations for the survival of the Aboriginal culture, basket making and other arts and crafts, saying prayers in Mi'kmaq and the importance of never wasting any food.

The present, in many ways, is the summation of so many experiences from the past — this is particularly evident when one listens to the elders speak about their lives and what it means to their Aboriginal identity in the present. For some, after all they have lived through, they are left with a great sense of conviction and determination about who they are and what it means to be an Aboriginal woman, an elder and a leader. Ironically, challenges to their Aboriginal identity have only strengthened them in the long run. for example,

When I was growing up there was so much discrimination that you didn't dare mention the word Mi'kmaq. That is why I came to Nova Scotia and I never told a soul. So, my husband died and didn't even know who I was. I even changed my name so nobody would know. I can understand my children because I thought they would go through the same thing I did because I went through a terrible, tortuous... my childhood was a hell. It was terrible... I feel sorry that this has happened. It would never have happened if it were not for the people saying mean things and discriminating against us.... I cried many times because I did this. I felt guilty. Now I feel differently. When you get my age you don't feel that there's anybody who you care what they think of you. 'Cause I don't care if they think I am ugly or pretty or...Mi'kmaq or a black person. It makes no difference to me. All people are only wearing the coats that they have to wear to live in this world — a spirit living within the body that they have — when they leave this world they...leave those coats and [their spirit] will still be around...

The last part of this excerpt alluded to a firm belief and faith in the world of the spirits that was also an important part of the identity of other elders in this circle. Clearly though, this woman lived through times of intense racist victimization, leaving her with feelings of fear, guilt and shame that have since been transformed into a sense of pride and determination. Other elders

expressed the same message in different ways: "Mine has never changed. I am an Indian and I'll speak Indian.... I speak...my language. I never lost that." Throughout their lives, though other people questioned, excluded, denied or tried to invalidate them — no matter what the circumstance — the Aboriginal heritage was the foundation or core of their identity. Perhaps the type of awareness that enabled some of these women to overcome adversity can be found in the following passage:

We had many things that we do that the neighbours and maybe even people coming in the house see us do that they think is strange and odd. But to us it is very real because it is part of the way we were brought up and the way we live.... It is not being phony, it is being true to our own selves. And somewhere the scripture says 'to thine own self be true' and we are true to ourselves and to our own families...and the way we pray and the way we worship and the way we...have such respect for the earth, for growing things, for trees and for anything that has life. We never destroy a thing of beauty. And I don't think it is phony, I think it is real.

This woman began by stating that it is this conviction that protected her from the damaging attitudes of people who do not understand her cultural expression. For example she felt that non-Aboriginal people, because they simply don't comprehend, perceive craziness in Aboriginal people when they express their culture through, for example, references to things like spiritual guides, names, naming ceremonies or foods that are culturally distinct.

Other women in the circle are still coping with the effects of colonialism and assimilation. Some of these women feel quite lost and speak with a hint of desperation when they express their wish for direction and strength as they search for and try to understand their Aboriginal heritage. For example, in a discussion about what people would say to an elder about their present cultural identity if they met the elder in a dream, one woman said,

I would be very happy to see the spirit. I would ask the spirit to help me find out who I am, I am lost, I feel so lost. My children also feel lost. A lot of this, as my mother said, is due to what happened to her as a child [referring to the woman who spoke about terrible experiences of racism perpetrated against her and other Aboriginal people], which reflected on us, her children, as we were growing up. And it went right down the line to my children who were in school, and when they wanted the children to write a family tree or something like that I always avoided it. Now I find my children avoiding it too. Because we can go back on my mother's side but that is about as far as we can go.... And now I find my children want to know so much and I feel so helpless to tell them anything because, simply, the fact is I don't know. And I would love to know more. But I also found there to be a lot of phoneyess...here and there throughout what I've learned and I wish that wasn't there. And I wish it was more truthful, I'd like to

know more.

The feeling of being lost, of searching for an identity that can guide you is expressed by many Aboriginal people; this woman is very clear about her heritage but finds that it is not validated completely by either the Aboriginal community or the dominant non-Aboriginal society. She identified herself as "a Bill C-31 person" and described the discrimination she feels from both communities as she tries to "walk two sides of the track", which leaves her feeling defensive often. In the end this woman said, "The worst part for me is that I don't know enough about my Mi'kmaq side so I am always on a search for who I am... I feel incomplete."

In their discussion the elders also looked at the vast range of terms used to identify Aboriginal people; they stated that these names often contribute to the confusion that many Aboriginal people feel about their identity. Said one elder, "You can just imagine all the different names. No wonder our children are confused." The participants laughed at the immense range of absurd and derogatory terms that have been used to refer to Aboriginal people, including treaty, status, non-status, on-reserve, off-reserve, Wannabe, Métis, urban, half-breed, breed, registered, apple, Eskimo, Innu, Inuit, Cree, Mi'kmaq, Bill C-31, script, Native, Indian, Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, squaw, wagon burner — and the list goes on as far as the imagination does. Though the elders could laugh at the names they have been called at different times in their lives, they admitted feeling oppressed by the lack of clarity or the demeaning intent of some labels. One woman said this:

I lived away from my people for...22 years. When you look at it, that's a long time. But I never changed my value structure; I never changed who I was. The meaning of my ancestral background meant everything to me. I never compromised, I never changed. I was proud of where I came from. I am still very proud of where I come from. I stand up for Native rights.... I'm not real comfortable saying Indian. At home in Labrador we use the term Innu... in all our books we had going to school we always read about the Indian. So even though you read about it going to school I was never comfortable with it. I must say...the Innu is much more dignified and it shows they are much more proud people. You [referring to another woman in the group] would be Cree and that is proper terminology and I think it is healthier to use the proper terms. With the young people we need to do that as well.

Later in the discussion the same speaker recapitulated the issue this way:

You do not have to be on a reserve to have respect, regard, care and love for mother earth. If we do not, and it is slowly coming to pass, take the time, as Native people we know we have always come from earth people, we have always had that. My father and his father before him, we have lived off the land, we have lived off the sea, we have lived off the forest, all our food came from these places.

Our clothing came from these places. I didn't know any other way but this for the first 18 years of my life. And then I went straight from that into the city. Mother earth is everywhere. You have to take regard for it. The white man is now coming to the Native people to learn how to heal. It might be late but it is not too late and it is important that Native people share their experience and knowledge to try to keep a balance right so that we don't destroy ourselves within the earth context — even universe! I have not changed in all the years. And I took my Native background living...[all over the world]...

The main thrust of the discussion boiled down to the fact that all the terms were externally defined and unclear to many of the elders when they scrutinized the expressions more closely. In the end there was a general caution that they would pass their own confusion on to the following generations if they didn't clarify what was important to them.

One speaker, while shedding light on an important part of her identity, offered some important insights into bridging the gap between those people who have knowledge and confidence in their Aboriginal identity and those people who long for it.

...we need to be passing down our culture, our tradition, our customs, our spiritual guidance. Our medicine people need to be helping people, taking in young people under their wing and guiding them and showing them all the things that they need to know. Otherwise it is going to be something that we will read about in the history books. The talent, the gifts, the special offerings that each and every one of us has must be shared with the younger people. If we need workshops, if we need to take them individually into our homes, conferences, however it is that we need to target our children. This is the only way that we are going to be able to preserve it.... the camera that we are using here needs to go into the homes of these elders with their permission to tape this for the next generations. Otherwise you will lose this; it will get so diluted down you will lose some of the qualities and uniqueness of each and every culture. And because you have this modern technology, why not use it? Some people don't want to be on video...but if you can put it on tape recorder at least you have the voice, you can write it down from the voice.... Living history is what we need to be zeroing in on right now. The people who are living are the ones who can help us. If we don't tap the resource of our elders — people right here, maybe we don't look at ourselves as elders but others maybe will — if we are not elders now we will be there tomorrow as an elder. And what [information and knowledge] you can get right now can be very pure. Twenty-five years from now how pure is it going to be? You lose chances, you lose opportunities. Communication is the key to all of it. The verbal, the written...it is really important that we share all of this. This is a way of zeroing in very quickly on this day in 1993, where we can make a difference for all of our children, all of our future children, all the seven generations and beyond.

The past: significant events, experiences, people, places

A Cree woman in the Halifax group had worked in the health care system all her life. This is the story she told the group, and it is an eloquent illustration of her transition from the past to the present. We get a glimpse of the change from her Aboriginal community's health care system to the mainstream health care system. We also see how she continues to integrate the lessons she learned from the elders in her Cree community in her work and family life today, to create change for Aboriginal people within the mainstream community:

A great responsibility was placed on my shoulders, I didn't realize how great... [In my home in] Cumberland House, Saskatchewan...I was chosen by elders of the community... I was the one chose to study Indian medicine. The reason I suppose was that I was always with my mother being the midwife, no matter what time of day or night, I was right behind her. I used to get up very early in the morning...before the sun came up I used to watch the Indian elders having the sunrise ceremony. I was always there. It was like I was going to church... in the beginning I knew I was a little bit different than other people because...I was told I was like a little old lady by the age of 6.... One of the things I knew was that I had to go to school. And knowing that I had to leave my family, about 500 miles away, that I wouldn't see them for many many years — and it is true — and when my mom died I wasn't even there when she was buried. Because I had given my whole life, my whole being, just dealing with Native people. I had given that promise.... I was able to blend in my Indian way with the white world. Because I do come from a family with mixed marriages.... My children grew up outside a reserve and I grew up near one... my mother was never a registered Indian. The reason was because her mother died at an early age. At three years old she was taken out from her reserve. As a result...she had lost her status and she married an Indian who was not a registered Indian, all of a sudden I became known as a half-breed as well. A half-breed is a person who comes from two different cultures and one of my cultures is the French side of the family.... I identified myself more, not as a half-breed, not as a Métis, I always knew who I was. So there was not a bit of an identity crisis there, because I always accepted it from early childhood. I was brought up by my grandmother who taught me many things. She was able to take me into the woods to teach me the name of the plants, the trees, and how my life was involved or being a Native involves the nature as well. All things in harmony.... I've been involved in many organizations and this is my way of...helping, guiding and teaching and I also learn from them as well. I am from the Cree nation and I have noticed that we have very similar religious beliefs of which one is...we respect each other. I was taught this from the very beginning. We respect our elders. So when an elder spoke to me and told me I was one of the chosen few I didn't know exactly what he meant but as I got a little bit older I am now able...to realize what those words meant... As a little girl I was...always asking why...lots of questions... But it is the heart inside that is very very important. It is from the inside that one grows. And this is one of my guides. In fact I have three Aboriginal guides: my mother, my grandfather and one is the

great-great-grandfather. They tell me these things...as a natural progression to being a healer... nursing was very important to me. I was the first Aboriginal to graduate from a nursing school out west... I didn't realize I was the person breaking the path for other people to follow. I didn't realize how important it was to have your family behind you and making sure you are being guided by your elders.... My culture was part of that living I was brought up in. It was right there in front of me. I had a bit of a problem trying to balance the white culture with the Indian culture together. But it came together and sort of blended in because you always felt more secure in the Native spirituality that no matter what else came to you, you were strong enough to know the difference. You were brought up to know this.... It was very real and very comforting. It comforts me to this day.

This strength and certainty of identity was expressed often by many of the women in the circle. The conviction they expressed with respect to their Aboriginal identity was nurtured in their youth by their family, their elders and their community — it is a confidence that continues to guide their actions daily. Here is another example of the firmly entrenched lessons from the past guiding the present. This woman began by telling the group that she was raised "literally off the land", as her father was a trapper, hunter and prospector among other methods of providing for his family. She feels the strength and purity of the love and values she learned as a child in an isolated part of Labrador; today she continues to draw from this foundation:

...so my ancestral background connects with the...Innu on my father's side from Quebec and the Inuit from the northlands of Labrador. So I could be very confused about this — But I am not! I am very solid. I am very sure. And I am very proud.... My elders would be proud of me. Of this I am sure!

With these determined words she passionately described what other women in the circle expressed in other ways. Other women focused on the importance of their home community, often from childhood but also through to adulthood and into the present, as a place that was central to their life and identity as Aboriginal people.

The women in the group remember many positive experiences from the past that feed their sense of Aboriginal identity; sometimes they spoke of simple pleasures like a trip to the spring and fall fairs to buy supplies and meet people from all over the region. Another important social gathering was around music; one woman grabbed the microphone and stated with brevity and fervour: "One thing that does stand out in my mind...is the fiddle playing and the dancing!" Many women also talked about survival or food gathering food; one woman said quietly and nostalgically, "Helping bring the wood, carry the water, helping plant the garden and enjoying the fresh vegetables. These are pleasant memories." For others the blueberries were part of their

identity; for a woman whose father was in the blueberry business, the season was a happy time of celebration with many people. Similarly, other women used to go with family and friends to Maine to harvest blueberries and potatoes; while there they would meet up with other Mi'kmaq people, and the event served to maintain kinship lines across the international border.

The Catholic church was often a part of the discussion by the elders as it played a large part in their lives — both in the past and the present. Like Aboriginal people from all over the country, many of the women in this group identify with the Catholic church as a result of their experiences at residential schools. None of the elders felt that the residential school (most spoke about the school at Shubenacadie) had any positive impact on their Aboriginal identity. Succinctly put, the school's mandate was to eliminate their Aboriginal identity by separating them from their families, their communities, their traditions and their language.

I felt like, when I was there for 10 years, it was like they taught us to forget that we were Indian. And when I was in a classroom I learned that Indians were so bad, in the textbooks, I was almost ashamed to be an Indian. This mandate was partially effective, as some women in the group expressed pain and confusion resulting from their loss of access to their Aboriginal ancestry that is directly attributable to the residential school system. Other women, though still confident in their identity, were angry that the school had given them a terrible education and wasted up to ten years of their lives while disrupting their familial bonds.

Apart from residential schools, the Catholic church also had an impact on community life for some of the women. One elder told the group this story from her childhood:

My first experience of the Catholic church telling me not to attend another church [where] my grandmother was being buried — an Anglican church... It became very clear to me that the culture that I was living and what the other church was telling me didn't ring very true to me. So as a very young girl, I used [my intellect] and I said, "My grandmother is my teacher. She was my guide, she taught me my language, everything I knew to be true." So here I was in this church and her body was in another church. And here is this Catholic church having a prayer and I didn't think it was quite right. So after church was finished immediately I got up and I told my father, "I'm now going to go to my grandmother's church. I'm going to go visit her." I said that in front of everybody. When I left it was like a procession, everybody followed me!... We cleared that church very fast because they were all my relatives and they followed me to the other church. I thought to myself, I'm just doing what my grandmother taught me to believe, doing what I felt was right in my heart. So the church didn't mean that much to me at the time because I didn't think it was quite true. It took me a little while to figure out that some of the rules in the church did not go very well with

the Indian culture I was brought up with. So there was a conflict. But then I began to understand the different meanings for different things that were one and the same. It is how you interpret it as such. So I did my own interpretation and decided that no matter if it is the Great Spirit or God it is one and the same so I am going to church to visit my grandmother. And I never regretted anything with that because much later on, about 35 years later, all of those churches are going together. So I was right in my way of thinking. So my grandmother did teach me the right things.

At various times in the discussion others in the group spoke of how they had experienced this same kind of cultural tension or conflict. As a result, they have either resolved it by integrating the Catholic church into their identity and lifestyle today or they have chosen to abandon the church altogether in favour of practising their own spiritual teachings. The integration of the Catholic church was evident when people spoke of important events, and many members identified St. Anne's day (St. Anne being the 'patron saint of Indians') as an important maritime celebration with a parade and festivities. One of the women added that the festivities also included a yearly pilgrimage by bus to the St. Anne de Beaupré basilica in Quebec. This yearly gathering was of great spiritual, cultural and social significance to her, as Aboriginal people from all over the maritime region participate in the trip each year.

Other events of significance to Aboriginal identity were more historical and political in nature. For example, a celebration such as Louis Riel day for the Cree woman was significant, because although he is depicted in mainstream schools as a villain, Louis Riel was fighting for Aboriginal people — for their culture, their land, their rights and their language. So this day is important to celebrate and come together with family members, elders and other Aboriginal people. Similarly, on the east coast there is the gathering of the National Assembly of Aboriginal people that happens each year and includes a celebration and meeting of many people.

One speaker, through her work, travelled to many different reserve communities to meet with different Aboriginal organizations; in doing so her identity was supported by the relationships she fostered with people from different communities. The experience also allowed her to compare many different cultures and see some of the similarities that bond all Aboriginal people together. In a similar way, different women identified their work with Aboriginal organizations in the community as something that was important to their identity.

Briefly, other aspects of their past that played central roles in their sense of Aboriginal identity included racism, death of parents, family gatherings marking rites of passage — Mi'kmaq death and burial ceremonies, pow wows, protests, the Oka crisis, the department of Indian

affairs, the Hudson's Bay Company, treaty day celebrations, basket making, the realization of previously unknown Aboriginal heritage in late teens, Micmac Friendship Centre, and sacred places such as petroglyphs or burial grounds.

Barriers: diminishment and denial of cultural identity

Though many barriers were identified, an interesting difference in the Halifax elders group, rarely expressed in the other locations, was that five of the ten participants said they did not feel deprived of or denied any part of their cultural identity. Those who didn't feel deprived attributed this to the fact that they had a strong family that brought them up with a sound sense of their Aboriginal identity. One woman stated that she might have been denied some material things but as a child it wasn't the focus of their values; instead she remembers feeling loved and secure in the relationships of her family. Another woman integrated the Catholic church into her Aboriginal identity; she told the group that she had a "very rich" life. For example in the early '50s there was no alcohol, drugs or family violence in her community; as a child she heard legends in her Mi'kmaq language before going to bed each night. Only when she left the reserve did she realize the world could be a hostile place where racism and fear fuelled the marginalization of Aboriginal people. In contrast to the younger members of other groups, many of the women in the elders' circle had lived through a time when their Aboriginal cultures were less impeded by mainstream society — it is these early years and a life of experience that the women draw on as a foundation to guide them daily.

Most of the elders felt that the government has played a role in diminishing or denying their cultural identity in some way. Starting with the issue of status, more than one speaker told the group how she was ostracized from her community and culture because she married a non-Aboriginal man or her mother married a non-Aboriginal man and had to leave the community. The division within families and the gender bias of the *Indian Act* is well expressed by this woman who was very frustrated by the government's membership criteria that have been imposed on reserve communities:

One of the things that has pained me on my cultural identity is the fact that...my mother has three or four brothers and three or four sisters. And three of the women, including the mother, married white men. All of the men married white women. The problem for me has been because the women married white men, they lost their status. The men in the family married white women, they have never lost their status. Nor have their children nor their children's children and so

on. And it has pained me a great deal...the discrimination that I feel against the women. And that has been part of my cultural identity and yet it has been robbed of me. It has been given back but I only feel it has been partly given back...with all these clauses in it...I really feel it is unfair. My first cousins are no more Indian than I am and yet I am discriminated against. It really bothers me.... I find that has been a real sore for me.

In another striking example of the divisions created by the *Indian Act*, one of the women — who was noticeably sad while speaking — told a story of how she was ostracized by her reserve community after married a white man:

We went back to the reserve... they told me I couldn't stay on the reserve because I was a white woman. I'm not a white woman, I'm an Indian. But they decided my children were white too and we weren't allowed to live there.... I had six sons. So we had to move to Kentville...so my children couldn't speak Indian... I couldn't speak English when I first started to go to school... I had an awful problem trying to communicate... now I speak both but my children can't speak [Mi'kmaq]. I knew all along who I was. The people didn't accept me because I was married to a non-Indian.

The extent of her exclusion proved to be extreme. As her story progressed she told the group about a time when she returned to the reserve to visit her mother; while visiting she went to pick blueberries for the meal and she was threatened at gunpoint by a man from the reserve who didn't feel she belonged there. She also told the group how, at other times, she could not have access to the water on the reserve when she visited with her husband and children. Another speaker was tearful at times when she told the group of how she felt cheated by a system of definitions that excluded her from her people for so long yet enabled her brothers' non-Aboriginal wives to enjoy the benefits of Aboriginal rights such as living in the reserve community. This woman told the group in disbelief that it was a great irony her brother's wife not only lived on the reserve but also worked in an influential position in the band office, enabling her to continue excluding people like the woman in the circle. Like this speaker, today many women are trying to build bridges to their cultural community — and their identity — in order to overcome the years of being disallowed their Aboriginal rights. Summarizing this issue with immense sorrow, one speaker said,

I really feel I was deprived of a very rich heritage.... Knowing who I am and being able to take part in things... pow wows, all the special kind of things. Just really being part of my family... language.

Another area where government played a significant role in diminishing Aboriginal identity was in the health care system. One speaker in the circle was chosen at a very early age by the community elders to learn the traditional medicines; later she was the first Aboriginal

woman to graduate from her school of nursing in the early 1950s. She had a wealth of experience in the health care from both communities. In her words,

When it comes to the health care system, I've been working in it since the early 1950s and I've seen whole communities wiped out with tuberculosis. I've seen women being sterilized without them knowing that they were being sterilized...without their consent...because they figured these women shouldn't have any more children because they couldn't take care of them. That is according to the white culture because they didn't understand the way we hold a child as a gift from God — a great gift from the Great Spirit. So the health care system had a really negative impact from what I've seen — being a graduate nurse in the early '50s, so I've seen many things happening. Again, in our present day, when Aboriginal people are in hospitals, or other professionals, they write these damaging reports for those Native people and there is nobody there to say, "Well, that's not true!". I've seen that happening in my own family and I had to fight them. I had to fight the doctors. I had to fight the psychiatrists. I was able to work within that system so that I could go and fight them.... how damaging it is... again, the justice system, the health care system, they are all interconnected...and the education system.... I always believed the education system was so important to our Aboriginal people because you have to be educated in another system in order to blend the two. And I think that could be done in our present day.... In my own little way I have been fighting the system. But in order to do that you have to know the system.

In her way she advocates for her family and other Aboriginal people in all government systems. This woman was often articulate and impassioned when speaking about her life in the Aboriginal community. Another speaker was equally outraged by the state of health care services delivered to Aboriginal people living in her homeland of Labrador. She personally went through the system with a brother, her mother and her father in recent years; in her words the "health care system in Labrador is deplorable, shocking and outrageous." The conditions of the system are not represented in the media sufficiently. For wealthier people there is quality service in the distant urban centres but for the poor — which affects a high percentage of Aboriginal people — the service is substandard. She spoke with rage and amazement as she described the effect on Aboriginal people and communities:

The people have no spirit left. They have given up! The suppression, apathy, oppression is like a disease. It is extremely negative, a breeding ground and the children see it, they hear it, they feel it, they smell it, they breathe it daily. It is with the Innu, the Inuit and the Métis — all of the people of the land.

She went on to say that the suffering of the people is more than she has ever experienced and on a scale that dwarfs the daily suffering of most urban people.

Another government-related barrier to cultural enhancement expressed by the elders was the education system — including the residential schools. The woman from Labrador also had strong feelings about her childhood educational experience:

I remember as a girl in Labrador we had probably three or four paragraphs on the history of Labrador. I was never so offended and so insulted in all of my life. I was not the only child that was curious and we did ask our teachers why there was nothing written on Labrador except three or four paragraphs in three or four books. It was like we didn't exist. There was nothing of substance there with the people. My parents were readers! I just could not believe that we would have that little in my whole school written about my home area, my homeland. My goodness it was nothing!

In all the group there were only one woman had seen something written about her community; further, the group universally expressed the need for more accurate history from an Aboriginal perspective to be taught in the education system (see recommendations section). Many of the elders also talked about the residential schools as a place that impeded their Aboriginal identity; often the speakers talked about how they lost their language or their relationship with their communities after being forced to spend 5 to 10 years at one of these institutions — for the maritime provinces it was the school at Shubenacadie (referred to as 'Shuby' by some of the speakers). Another criticism of the residential school was that the education received was substandard:

I really don't know what to say; I was deprived of everything. My parents died at an early age. I was put in Shuby school — big deal — but I didn't get much education. What I learned I took at night school in Dartmouth and then I went in to help the sick people [psychiatric patients].... It was a place to go at the time; I had no parents. I was taken there by a priest who was the Indian agent at the time. I didn't even know where I was going...til I got to this big place. And I thought, oh my God, where am I. I was quite scared. They wouldn't let us speak our language there.

Another woman expressed a similar criticism but she was more specific about the reasons for being denied a proper education at this institution that was supposedly put in place by government and the churches to provide an education for Aboriginal children. She spoke with quiet resentment when she told the group,

When I was brought up in the school I feel I was denied the language. And the children were sort of afraid to speak because I think they were told they would get a beating if they spoke the language. The other thing I think I was denied was school. They put me in the kitchen all the time. I would go six weeks without seeing a classroom, I would be in the kitchen. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen [laundry and sewing]. And...when the exam came I didn't know what was going

on. I didn't do very good and I told the sister I didn't learn it because I didn't go to school for six weeks and she'd say, "Don't worry about it, we'll fix it." And another thing too, I was deprived of my father. My father fought hard to take me out of the school and they wouldn't let him. My uncles and aunts...fought for about ten years and they couldn't. They fought to get me out of there and they couldn't.

After her experience at the school this woman also ended up going to night school to complete grade 11 while raising three children. The sense of waste and futility that she felt was clear in her expression. Still another elder who had been working for 30 years as a professional in the Aboriginal community stated that she had been through all levels of the education system. From her own experience, she felt that something was lacking in her education; in response, she has made her business to provide opportunities for others to speak and write their own language and to learn an accurate history of Aboriginal people. She was also critical of the pace of change in the education system as well as in the government and society in general:

Our systems have been very slow to change. They haven't moved! I have made little progress over the years. I think that the progress that should have been made over the years — considering the damage that has been done to our people...to me it's too slow.

Her wealth of experience working for her people gave great weight to the anger and despair she expressed.

The justice system was the other major government institution that circle members experienced as a barrier to their Aboriginal identity. In this long passage the speaker begins with the justice system but also touches on other institutions that inhibit Aboriginal identity. Starting with her own family she articulates the oppression that many Aboriginal people feel:

My daughter married a non-Native. When the marriage broke up the judge looked at my daughter and said, "You should be lucky to have a White man looking after you. And you're not fit to be a mother." So...she got her separation. They separated the children and placed my grandson in white foster homes. In the foster homes he was sexually abused. I found this out and I immediately took action. I called the RCMP and we took the children out immediately. If it wasn't for me I think they would have been still left in those places. Social services was aware of this and placed them in these homes. I fought... it does cost a lot of money to get lawyers and whatever... But, I became a little bit more militant. That's not like me but when it comes to my family, and I see them hurting then I fight harder. I began to be known in the justice system; when I came in they would say, "Oh yes, the grandmother is here." I could hear them talking 'cause they knew I was there for a fight. I wasn't there just to listen. I suppose I became much stronger that way too and I began to know my way around the justice system. I believe that Aboriginal people are not given the benefit of the doubt. Immediately because

they are Aboriginal they are told...I don't know, the punishment doesn't fit the crime. My grandson is a...young offender. When you look at the punishment that was given my grandson, he should never have been given that type of a punishment. When you look at the other type of punishments, immediately I did some research, I looked in the paper, and I placed it upon them. I've been complaining about this all along and all of a sudden somebody began to listen to me because when I said I was going to take them to court themselves and there would be an inquiry. All of a sudden everything changed. So now...whenever I make a call for me to visit my grandson, doors are opening. It never happened before. So I would say that I learned an awful lot as I come along. Not only did I help myself and my family but other people came to me for help. I was able to direct them to people that they could go. I think that the justice system has a long way to go but at least they are trying now. Because more people are being aware and I'm very proud to know that we are getting a lot more Aboriginal people who are more educated now like teachers, social workers, lawyers. And of course in the health system as well. I think that we do need more facilities for Aboriginal people — the friendship centres are the only place that you can go now in the cities. And the governments are...giving lip service right now. But if we don't stick together we are not going to get anywhere. So I think it is up to us to stick together and make sure that we share and go back to our Aboriginal ways and I'm sure that we can do a lot more. We've done a lot...Tawaak housing...the friendship centre...all of a sudden doors are open. We made headway with the provincial government. We know that the system doesn't work for us so we have to work within the system. And I am one of the persons working in that system. I know I've been called a red apple before; but I don't mind that. I feel that I'm doing something; I have to know the system to fight within that system, and that is what I'm doing.

This woman's anger and determination resounded with all she said; clearly, her wealth of experience and courage to fight has isolated her in some ways but she has also been an effective agent of change within these systems.

Another speaker told the group about some research she did on a race riot in Halifax; she found that the incident had been handled very poorly by the police and the media. Studying the records of a community group that investigated police conduct in the affair and also the report of a panel from the police department that included officers and lay people, it was clear that the only people who were not critical of the way the police conducted themselves were the police themselves.

Racism was something different members identified when considering the phenomena in their lives that diminish their identity. For one woman it was a neighbour who did not like Aboriginal people and often called her names when she walked down the street. One of the older women told a remarkable story about the role of racism in her life; at an early age, this speaker

told the group, her life was very painful because of the intensity of racially motivated attacks that she endured. In an effort to get away from this sort of persecution she left her community, and when she did she completely denied her Aboriginal heritage. In the city she used false names, changing up to a dozen times, to cover her identity. She told the group that her husband went to his grave never knowing of her Aboriginal heritage. After his death she raised six children on her own and feared the government would take them away if they found out her true identity; only when they were in their late teens was she able to tell her children the truth. Interestingly, one of her daughters was in the group, so we were given a glimpse of the destructive second-generation effects of this racism. Though she never blamed her mother for trying to protect her, the daughter did express great sadness and grief:

It's a lost part...like something that you've lost and you know you'll never find again. Like a ring I lost when I was fishing once. And I knew I'd never find it again.... Say if someone had a lot of money put aside for you and you didn't know it. And then all of a sudden they say, "Here, I've been saving this for you all these years. You've turned 21 and now you can have it." It was kind of a shock. It was happy and things like that and then you might say, "Well gee, why didn't you tell me when I was sixteen. I could have done something about it. I could have helped you...to iron out the details" ...or something like that. Even though we were only young we could have tried to help.

Repeatedly this speaker told the group of her despair at not having a heritage to share with her children because she was never given it herself.

Some of the other aspects of people's lives that members felt either diminished or denied parts of their identity included violation and abuse, both as a child and as an adult, poverty, including being on family benefits, lack of resources, inadequate housing and negative community environments, addictions, and churches.

Empowerment: cultural identity strengthened and enhanced

There was not a lot of discussion when the group focused on the aspects of their cultural identity strengthened in the urban environment; instead the facilitator had the group compose a list of important elements. At other points in their process the theme that surfaced most often for some of participants was how they drew strength in their Aboriginal identity from family and friends. For the women who grew up with many traditional influences it is clear that this important time in their lives continues to nourish them today. This dynamic is articulated in the following excerpt; the speaker is referring to a circle she drew for an exercise comparing the two

communities:

My circle tends to stay with my original childhood roots and I maintain it and take it wherever I go. That's the only thing that I remember because of the isolation I had away from my land and my people [for 22 years]... I maintained that wherever I went. It went with me and I went with it. I never departed from it. I always kept it with me and I still continue to do so. And really that's where I draw all my strength. It's amazing how you can go many different ways when you are isolated from your people but I pulled the strength from it — the positive portion of it. So my circle is bigger with Native people because that is where I learned and that's where I grew. That's where my values and my belief system are from. I did blend the modern times with it but never ever sacrificing or letting go of my original roots. And I will keep that with me forever — and share it.

Other speakers also identified how they drew strength from their family and Aboriginal

community, among them this woman:

I guess there is something really missing when you don't have connections on the reserve, which I have. I still have some strong connections on the reserve, I'm back and forth and I work in the Indian communities — I just live in the city. I suppose you could say that it's just a place for me to hang my hat a couple of days a week and the rest of the time I'm on the reserves in my work.

Her professional identity was central to her life. She was working in the education system, to give Aboriginal people the opportunity to be exposed to their language and an accurate history of their people. Drawing on similar themes, other women in the circle identified the following as important people to their identity: educators, artists, writers, dancers, elders, ancestors, educational counsellors and singers.

One woman spoke about regaining her status under Bill C-31 as an important experience that strengthened her Aboriginal identity. In this passage she uses a powerful metaphor to describe the impact of the event:

I felt all of a sudden like a tree that the roots went right down and touched the water.... like I had roots where before I was like a water lily just floating around. This woman spent a long period of her life hiding her ancestry for fear of racial discrimination. When she finally felt safe enough to expose her Aboriginal identity she had to go to great lengths to have it validated — getting notes from lawyers, priests and other powerful people who knew her. The other elders also talked about important experiences that helped them feel strong. Their lists included births, deaths, marriages, name giving, spiritual ceremonies, language programs, fishing, hunting, dancing, singing and listening to elders speak.

People in the circle drew strength from joining together with other Aboriginal people; for example, the friendship centre was a place where people could meet, build relationships and feel

validation for their identity. This woman was tearful at points when she spoke about the importance of women coming together such as during this learning circle to talk about important issues:

I don't know that it makes me feel stronger. It makes me feel less alone in things. Also that we can join together and become stronger as one and we can have a stronger voice.

Similarly, political demonstrations were times when the members felt the whole community came together and it made them feel individually stronger as a result. Other examples of events that brought Aboriginal people together included pow wows, healing circles, conferences or workshops, multicultural events or sports tournaments.

Lastly, under the heading of important places, the elders identified the following as playing a role in strengthening their Aboriginal identity: the Micmac Heritage Art Gallery, the Nova Scotia Museum, sacred burial grounds, petroglyph sites in the maritime area, parks, and an affordable housing project for Aboriginal people called Tawaak Housing.

Two communities: Aboriginal and mainstream

The following table represents aspects of the two communities that were outlined by the Halifax elders when they were asked to represent visually the most important influences on their cultural identity using pie diagrams.

Aboriginal	Mainstream
family and friends (+)	friendship centre (+)
homeland, home territory (+)	housing: limited access because of affordability or racism (-); more available in urban (+)
language (+); lack of access to or inability to speak or learn (-)	racism, ignorance and misunderstanding (-)
education/schools/residential school: with relevant, authentic and accurate curriculum (+); racism, misinformation, cultural suppression, abuse (-); acquisition of skills and knowledge (+); lack of funding	education/schools/residential school: with relevant, authentic and accurate curriculum (+); racism, misinformation, cultural suppression, abuse (-); acquisition or useful skills and knowledge (+); lack of funding (-)
meetings, conventions, workshops (+)	family and friends (-)
recreation, entertainment (+); limited variety (-)	church: dividing Aboriginal people (-); cultural suppression (-); spiritual direction and rites of passage (+); support, meeting place (+)

land, sea, forest, nature (+)	travel (+)
food preparation, harvesting, e.g., blueberry picking (+)	more choices in marketplace for goods and services (+)
pow wows (+)	media: stereotypes, racism, misinformation, negativity (-); authentic, accurate, positive (+)
ceremonies, feasts, wakes (+)	employment: more choices in urban centre (+); racism (-); no upward mobility (-)
Micmac Friendship Centre (+)	recreation (+)
arts, crafts, writing, e.g., basketry, poetry (+)	Bill C-31: as tangibly validating identity (+); causing division and exclusion in families and communities (-)
church: for spiritual direction (+); as place of meeting and fellowship (+); contributing to community divisions, conflict and tensions (-)	medical services: greater access in urban centre (+)
employment (+), unemployment (-)	government: control, cultural suppression, racism (-); supporting with resources to some positive and effective programs (+)
stories, music, dance (+)	social assistance: poverty and dependence (-); support (+)
physical and sexual abuse (-)	justice system: bias, racism, mistreatment of Aboriginal people (-); new initiatives to train and hire more Aboriginal people as part of steps to make system more just (+)
tragedies, accidental deaths: sorrow and loss (-); bringing community together in mourning (+)	physical and sexual abuse (-)
reserve community: place of friends and family (+); identity validation (+); small, confining, limited resources (-)	tai chi (+)
poverty (-)	army and navy: source of employment (+)
Indian spirituality (+)	St. Anne's day (+)
Indian medicines (+)	RCAP: if effective and representative (+)
RCMP (-)	festivals (+)
fishing, hunting, trapping (+)	taxes (-)

In the discussion that followed the visual mapping of these two communities the group members spoke about some of their feelings in relation to the communities and also about the degree of conflict or compatibility that they perceived between the two. In part, great strength

was expressed on the part of many group members with respect to their Aboriginal identity. One can observe in some speakers' lives a firm foundation in their Aboriginal values and cultural traditions that carries them through their lives even though much of that life may be lived, physically and socially, apart from the community they grew up in; this woman, who always spoke of her Aboriginal identity with clarity, pride and intensity, expressed these ideas well:

My circle tends to stay with my original childhood roots and I maintain it and take it wherever I go. That's the only thing that I remember because of the isolation I had away from my land and my people... I maintained that wherever I went. It went with me and I went with it. I never departed from it. I always kept it with me and I still continue to do so. And really that's where I draw all my strength. It's amazing how you can go many different ways when you are isolated from your people but I pulled the strength from it — the positive portion of it. So my circle is bigger with Native people because that is where I learned and that's where I grew. That's where my values and my belief system is from. I did blend the modern times with it but never ever sacrificing or letting go of my original roots. And I will keep that with me forever — and share it.

In these words we witness a fundamental strength that this woman continually draws on throughout her life, a strength fostered in the isolation of Labrador for the first eighteen years of her life. Although this passage appeared earlier in this document it is a powerful excerpt that fits here as well. Earlier this woman told the group that her family lived off the land, the forest and the waters; it is from the earth that her father, a trapper and prospector by trade, made his living and provided for his family. Until she left home at eighteen this speaker knew no other way.

Another woman conveys a similar strength and conviction in her identity that came from her nurturing family and supportive community:

My Aboriginal circle is a lot larger than my mainstream circle although I've lived in the non-Indian community for 30 years or so. But I think my situation is quite unique because I'm a single person; I've never been married or had a family or children. I'm strictly a career girl. I've been working for all these years and I have been working for Native people. Although my office has been, most of the time, off the reserve, I have maintained very close relationships with the reserves. I'm on the reserves half the time. And your family is there, and my reserve is there, and my parents' house is there, and my room is there. So in a way it's much larger. And I think as my life goes on, as I retire probably, I hope to retire on the reserve. I'm inclined towards spending my retirement years on the reserve.... I don't think they are in conflict because I feel very good about both. I feel that in my association with the non-Indian community as I live off the reserve is that it's work-related. And most of the work-related experiences that I have are very positive. And I am able to share my Aboriginal background and ancestry with other non-Indian groups — which is positive.

Throughout the group's discussion over the two-day period this woman often spoke of

how she was able to exist in the mainstream culture while remaining firmly entrenched in her Aboriginal community. When she elaborated on the formative years of her life in her family and community in the early 1950s, she told the group that she perceived no major social problems in her reserve community at that time, so she is able to draw on the strength of this healthy foundation continually.

Other members also expressed an ability to move between the two communities with no regrets or major stress. Still other women told the group that they could move between the two worlds but they felt "torn between the two". This woman shared her story of hiding her Aboriginal identity for years when she first moved to the city. Today she is able to survive in the two communities, but it has not been an easy transformation:

I feel like sort of torn between the two. But the reason my circles are almost the same is because I was born and brought up 'til age 11 on the reserve. And then when I was 11 I took tuberculosis and I didn't remember much about it until I was 14 when I left there. But the mainstream, the big one, is mostly what I lived in — white society — since then. But nearly everything I learned as a child has stuck with me and it never left me. The only thing was the language that we weren't allowed to speak and I didn't want to speak it in case of being found out when I came here (to Halifax).... [I felt torn because]...I felt like when I was brought up and all the things I was taught, they were so different in the mainstream...that you tried to do things the way you were used to doing them and then you find out you have to do them all different in another society.

Like the other speakers this woman draws from the same foundation for her identity.

Though she is over 60 years of age it is very clear to her where much of her world view has developed — in her formative years within the Aboriginal community. Her daughter, who was also in this learning circle, told a very different story. Fearing racism in the city, her mother never told her children of their Aboriginal identity until they were in their late teens; though this new information affirmed some important feelings and suspicions this woman had had throughout her life, there was an accompanying sense of loss and sadness that surfaced when she compared the two communities:

I just don't feel good because the mainstream one is much larger than the Aboriginal one. And I guess I learned most everything from that. And the Aboriginal circle is so small but I hope that one day it is going to be much bigger.... simply, I did not have a chance to learn because I didn't know anything about it.

Though she harboured no noticeable resentment or anger toward her mother for not exposing her earlier to this important source of her identity, she clearly regretted not having had the chance to

integrate more of her heritage into her world. Now she feels an added helplessness at not feeling able to give the same information to her children, who are very proud of their Aboriginal heritage and crave to learn as much as they can about it.

Recommendations

We, the Elders, recommend the following:

1. That qualified Aboriginal educators, writers, historians, and elders be commissioned to rewrite our history accurately by integrating the oral histories, storytelling, memories, dreams, visions, elders' life histories, tribal languages, customs, traditions and culture. And that the rewriting proceed through the following stages:

- (a) Accurate historical information should first be available to Aboriginal children, families, communities and nations.
- (b) This information should also be recorded in textbooks and reference materials such as audio-visual recordings and written information.
- (c) The information should then be distributed through all levels of education systems — from preschool to post-graduate.

2. The establishment of Aboriginal youth centres with culturally appropriate activities and programs that promote fun and teach cultural values and tradition.

3. The establishment of safe, healthy and secure environments for elders' residences within the cities that promote culturally appropriate activities with adequate resources and facilities to do so — including proper medical support systems.

4. Provide equal opportunity for Aboriginal people to obtain or purchase adequate housing within urban settings so that families can live in safe neighbourhoods.

5. Establish a multifaceted Aboriginal cultural centre within the urban setting, location to be central, accessible and safe for everyone who wishes to use it. Further,

- (a) Aboriginal elders should be used throughout the development and in the daily activities and programs of the centre wherever possible.
- (b) Make available language programs that reflect the surrounding regional Aboriginal nations who will make up the clientele of the centre.
- (c) Promote and use traditional circles of spiritual healing, teaching and learning within the centre.
- (d) Aboriginal people would compile, promote, distribute and preserve our elders' life histories, storytelling, visions and dreams on audio-visual and written records.
- (e) Design, develop and implement a library/archival resources centre that includes local historical events from an Aboriginal perspective.
- (f) Have available instruction in craft techniques for the maintenance and promotion of age-old cultural/traditional skills — open to all ages.
- (g) Include in the centre a daycare centre to meet the needs of the urban Aboriginal community.

(h) To employ Aboriginal people from the community, include also a gift shop in the centre that promotes and sells Aboriginal crafts, books, records, tapes, art, etc. to the general public.

(i) Make available a variety of meeting rooms for free access by Aboriginal community people, with rental available to general public.

6. Aboriginal people demand acknowledgement — by governments, churches and any other agencies involved with the establishment, development and implementation of the residential school system — of the horrendous atrocities committed against the First Peoples. For the protection of our future generations, our culture and our way of life, the First Peoples advocate that such an institution — or anything like it — never be established again. Further, assistance must be given to all Aboriginal people who have been adversely affected by these establishments to heal from the suffering they have endured.

Conclusion

When many of the elders in this circle spoke, their words often showed a clarity of perspective that has been nurtured through their vast life experience. The group represented a wide spectrum of experience, and some of the younger members have lived their lives, in some respects, disengaged from their ancestry and searching for a missing part of their identity. Others drew on a firm foundation of family and community where they internalized a set of values, beliefs and skills that have guided them through their long lives in both the mainstream and Aboriginal communities. As indicators of their ability to integrate the two communities, consider that, of the ten women, five stated that they did not feel deprived or denied of their cultural identity in any way, and six of the women spoke their language fluently. On the other hand, most of the women have lived outside Aboriginal communities for much of their lives. Another interesting manifestation of how these women combine the two worlds was the opening prayer: one elder in the circle said a Catholic prayer and another elder played a drum and sang a Mi'kmaq song while the group smudged. Still, one could observe that their ability to integrate the two communities does not always come easy for these women, as one of the older speakers admitted that she felt "torn" between the two cultures and some of the younger speakers expressed a longing to have access to the traditions of their ancestry that have always been beyond their grasp.

Analysis of Core Themes and Fundamental Issues in the Learning Circles

This section attempts to bring together the essential elements of all ten learning circles in the six locations across the country. After taking part in the groups, viewing videotapes of the sessions,

and making individual descriptive analyses of all ten groups, the researchers identified several important themes that arose repeatedly throughout the process. Further, two levels of analysis emerged as useful for understanding the information: **fundamental issues** that arose from the discussions about cultural identity within the learning circles and **core themes** that underlie the fundamental issues. Here is a sample of some of the fundamental issues: education, elders, youth, women, Bill C-31, self-government, nature/land, spirituality, the churches, residential schools, addictions, homeland/community, government, family, language, media, political activity and organizations.

The core themes underlying the fundamental issues are racism, patriarchy and capitalism. The core themes are the driving forces — the social, political and economic constructs — that define and fuel colonization. The core themes inform or influence the creation of government policy, public perceptions and mainstream institutions that play a significant role in socializing people, whether it is through education, media, social services or government; all have policies and practices that are set up to reinforce or destroy particular values and beliefs. With respect to Aboriginal people, very specific and conscious policies have been introduced to marginalize them — socially, politically and economically — and annihilate their cultural identity. Further, the lessons of racism and inferiority are also internalized by Aboriginal peoples, resulting in destructive potential being exercised by individuals, families and communities on themselves like a cancerous growth that is life-defeating. At this point Aboriginal people take part in their own colonization — they take over the work of the Indian agent, the residential school, the degrading media images. Additionally, one must consider that, in reaction to these core themes, the healing path of Aboriginal people is, in large part, a process of unlearning racism, de-colonizing minds and hearts, shedding feelings of inferiority, shame and despair to foster the creation of self-determining individuals and communities. All these healing efforts must take place in conjunction with the healing path for non-Aboriginal people, which is to unlearn their own racism, their internalized dominance and unearned privileges in order to begin to work authentically with Aboriginal peoples. Removing barriers (social, economic, political, institutional) and developing avenues within the mainstream that respect and support the distinctness of Aboriginal peoples — these are some ways this authentic work can be done.

Racism

I think the most terrible experience for an Indian person in the urban setting is racism in the community. That diminishes your self-esteem, confidence and anything else. You experience racism everyday in the stores and everywhere else, on the street. All the other groups discriminate against you.

This person went on to describe how racism is experienced by Aboriginal people in most of the dominant mainstream institutions including, education, the justice system, employment situations, and health and social services.

Though they sometimes spoke of it as a separate issue, racism permeated most of the issues that group participants spoke about. Racism is at the heart of all that attempts to diminish Aboriginal cultural identity. Colonization is deeply rooted in the racist notion of white European superiority. For the sake of clarity we will define racism as a belief held by a racial group that it is superior and, accordingly, has the right to dominate another racial group. In Canada and around the world racism based on skin colour has become the justification, over time, for economic, political, social and spiritual marginalization — in short, for cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples. Additionally, there are different levels of racism that structure power imbalances; the most significant level is institutional racism, which is legislated policies and practices (social, economic, legal, etc.) that support the domination of the white race over Aboriginal peoples. These policies are institutionally grounded and are embedded in our collective socialization. For example, the *Indian Act*, the reserve system, and the residential school system, among many other institutions, are all examples of fundamentally racist mainstream policies and practices — they all ensure that political disempowerment, cultural genocide, poverty and other forms of oppression will pervade in the lives of Aboriginal people. Importantly, over time these policies profoundly influence what we — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike — internalize about Aboriginal culture and identity. In short, these policies and practices, which are rooted in racist ideology, have severely impeded Aboriginal people's sense of who they are and where they belong.

Another important issue with respect to racism is the phenomenon of internalized racism. When people have been exposed repeatedly to certain messages about themselves, in this case racist messages, the result is that they begin to accept those messages or internalize them. In essence, the messages become a part of the person and the external cues are no longer necessary. This is internalized racism. It is one of the most serious issues Aboriginal people must heal from.

One of the Halifax elders spoke often of how she hid her Aboriginal identity — from all people including her own husband — for many years to protect herself and her children from the potential harm their family might incur if people knew they were of Aboriginal ancestry.

I sometimes feel like it gets easier but it never does cause when we were there [at the residential school] we were always told we were dirty Indians, drunken Indians. And they said that to all the classes. We were told we were stupid. Up to grade 7 I was an A student but after I was told I was stupid my marks went down. They told me my marks dropped because I was boy crazy, after that I just didn't care any more. What was the sense I mean I'm only Indian? They told me I'd be a dirty drunken Indian living on a reserve so I thought there's one way to fix that, I won't marry an Indian so I won't have to live on reserve and I won't be Indian anymore because if you don't marry an Indian you lose your status. So that was my way of rebelling.

This woman also expressed profound grief that she passed these feelings on to her children, and so they have had little or no exposure to their own Aboriginal identity. Many Aboriginal people, like this woman, have internalized the racism they experienced; in her case the messages clearly led her to try and sever her bonds with her Aboriginal identity, resulting in years of emptiness, pain and confusion that she tried to quell through substance abuse and self-destructive behaviours — from which she is now healing. To overcome internalized racism, Aboriginal people must begin to decolonize their minds and understand the roots of their oppression. Only a focus of this nature will allow them to stop the perpetration of the victim-blaming stance which has been the underlying approach to social change schemes in the past.

It is important to read about the fundamental issues with this definition of racism in mind, as it will help the reader understand the profound forces at play in the lives of the speakers.

Colonialism as Imposed Social and Political Chaos

Politically and socially, colonialism has left a legacy of chaos in Aboriginal communities. Founded on imperialism, today the political structures in reserve communities resemble patriarchal democracies. For example, some of the women in the Halifax circle talked about the difficulties they have returning to their reserve communities after going away to educate themselves with skills they feel will benefit their community.

We have a lot of male people who are in politics who are the leaders in the community — who are not educated. You've got a lot of women who are educated, getting the training, living in urban areas. When they want to go back home the

male population doesn't want these people to go back home because the majority...are getting educated. So it is that struggle between the men on the reserve who are not educated and the women who are educated and trying to find a place for themselves within that community — the power struggles around gender and education and training are always there. So it's no wonder that Native people are not going to encourage women to come home to work in the community because they are scared to lose their jobs.

There are many forces at play in this excerpt. First, there is clearly sexism that signals a breakdown in respect for the potential contributions both sexes can offer the community. The sexism is, in many cases, a by-product of a patriarchal political structure that was imposed through colonization. As a whole, the community loses important human resources because of this division, and it is women who shoulder the bulk of the oppression and disempowerment because they are less valued in their own communities. Second, because patriarchal democracy is not necessarily the political structure that traditionally governed Aboriginal communities, this causes tension and division. Further, poverty is rampant in a majority of Aboriginal reserve communities, so the few jobs that do exist are fiercely protected by individuals and families, often through nepotism. From nation to nation Aboriginal cultures in different regions of Canada traditionally practised a variety of political and social structures to organize and run the affairs of their communities. Some may have resembled the democratic patriarchy that was imposed by European colonizers, while others were quite different, resembling, for example, a matriarchal collective political culture. In the end, one inheritance of colonization for many Aboriginal communities is imposed political and social structures that serve to create confusion and division as they clash with traditional systems (many of which are practised alongside or underneath the European models) of the people who are governed by them.

Capitalism as Structured Economic and Political Disempowerment

In general, the economic and political disempowerment of Aboriginal peoples is central to the goals of colonization and assimilation. In essence, colonization began with the idea of imperial expansion and was inherently capitalistic as a result. Under the *Indian Act* people lost all control of the land and resources they once used for their livelihood. In a capitalist society ownership of these resources is the basis of economic and political self-determination. As well, the marginalization of Aboriginal people ensured that they could not take part in or influence the mainstream political will. This is quite evident in the way that, even today, many of the reserve

communities are without sufficient basic amenities such as adequate housing, running water and electricity. Yet the people who live in those communities are powerless to sway the decisions of politicians and others who control such matters. Additionally, without an economic and political power base, Aboriginal people were corralled into a state of futility and dependence — precursors of the anomie and social distress that are evident in reserve communities all over the country today. This social breakdown is at the heart of much suffering and despair and is expressed in the symptoms of addictions, family violence, suicide, community division and various manifestations of mental and physical illness.

The Fundamental Issues

The following sections present some of the fundamental themes that the participants spoke about in the learning circles. It is important to see these themes in light of the core issues just outlined; throughout this section of the analysis we highlight the core issues as they influence each of the themes.

Government services and control

This didn't just happen! When I was born, 28 years ago, at that time slavery was still very much in existence in the U.S. In the last few years I've applied myself to try to learn something — culturally and otherwise. And what I learned was that the situation we are in today is largely [a result of] policies the government has enacted. The best way to describe it is to use this institution to say how I feel. I feel very trapped. I'm institutionalized. But it can't be any more different than what our old people have gone through because shortly after Confederation the *Indian Act* came to life. And then our people were not allowed to leave the reservation, they had to have a pass. Secondly, they couldn't practise their culture. Thirdly, they couldn't form an organization to speak on their behalf. Lawyers were banned from acting on behalf of Native people. Shortly after creating the reservation they used starvation as a means of getting the people to enter into treaty. You have to understand that slavery was still very much a part of government policy. The origin of the government was in England. There was a lot of hatred, a lot of discrimination. There was no credit given to our people. Before they came here 500 years ago we had a complex society and we existed here for a long time. And we had our own institutions or law, the way our elders taught us to be, what it was to be an Indian. These societies existed long before these people came over here. And everything they brought was imported, including the religion. The important thing about religion when the French came up the St. Lawrence...[they claimed that] because our people did not pray to Christ...by virtue of that, they had no claim to land. If you weren't a Christian or a Catholic,

you had no rights whatsoever.... people forget that underlying these policies they have today is a lot of discrimination. So the origin of our social stress today is not so much us but it is more to do with the government.

As this man from the inmates' circle, gathered in Winnipeg, suggests, the government services that exist today for Aboriginal people flourish from the soil of a colonial relationship that began with genocidal intentions. Though the political rhetoric of the day is liberal democracy, Aboriginal people still experience barriers to a humane, respected, self-determined existence. The barriers to such an existence are felt in all the major institutions of mainstream society: justice, education, social services, health care, religion, employment. There are exceptions, and the situation is slowly improving, but participants in the circles reported on the basis of their experience that racism is still widespread.

The participants in the inmates' circle were able to express with great frankness and passion what it is like to live a life so closely controlled by a mainstream institution. Their voices were extremely valuable, considering all had lived through at least two (many had been in three or four) institutional experiences in their lives, including residential school, child welfare, education and justice. More than once the point was made during that circle that the men felt as though their history of institutionalization was simply preparation for the ultimate institution of control: the prison.

It almost seems like, with all the things we've been through, we've all been prepared for the eventual fate of being here. It's all been directed to one thing. And that's still a form of genocide.

The men were able to articulate many specific aspects of their oppression; perhaps the most emphasized theme was that their efforts to heal themselves and deal with the problems that preceded and underlay their incarceration are obstructed by the prison administration. Here is a common example:

The church services in this institution are 52 services a year. And the [sweatlodges] are only limited to, sometimes, two a month, but in most cases only once a month. And it's frustrating because the amount of Natives within this institution outweighs the number of non-Natives within this institution [57 per cent Aboriginal]. And yet the church has more services than the sweats. And in order to go through the healing process...it takes more than just one sweat... our sweat is a church. That's what it is because we go in there and we pray. That's what it is. It's a church. It's my opinion that the institution should recognize the sweats. We should also have 52 sweats a year, the same as the church here does. Because of the amount of guys here, like he [another man in the circle] just said, he can only go in the sweat once because he has to give somebody else a chance to go in the sweat...to also undergo that healing process. And that's where the

frustration comes in, because of the lack of being able to participate in our culture. There's a roadblock set in front of you if you want to continue to learn our culture. Which, in the end, would better ourselves. 'Cause when we get out of here, when we get on the street, we always get confused, it's hard. When I got out the last time it was hard. Because I couldn't function out on the street because I was institutionalized. By living through the guidelines, and the rules and regulations and programs. Sending in proposals for a sweat, putting in memos for a sweat. Putting in this, putting in that...and it all adds up to making you feel confused and frustrated and you just feel like saying, the heck with everything. Something has to be done because we need to heal ourselves in here.

Bringing in elders and community people to facilitate the healing process was also desperately needed by the men, but these efforts too were hampered by administrative and bureaucratic barriers. The immense over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system was a fact that participants from different regions of the country used to illustrate the institutionalized racism that exists at the very core of Canadian society. One of the elders in the Saskatchewan treaty circle made this observation about why such a system should continue when it is clearly so unjust:

Sure you're gonna have all those jails in this country so you can put all our people in there and make jobs so you can have jobs. And the welfare system. Who's in the welfare office? You see very few Indian people in there, it's all white people. I said, "You won't let us go! You'll never want to let us go because we're a big industry, you make money on us." The police, the jails, it's full up with Indian people. If it wasn't for our Indian people they wouldn't have no jobs. It's the white people who are getting the jobs.

The same observation was made by men in the prison group. Another elder in the Halifax group shared her own opinion of why such a system continues; in essence the injustice continues because it can, because Aboriginal people never had the power to stop it. But, like this elder, they are learning how to advocate effectively for themselves to force change:

I fought... it does cost a lot of money to get lawyers and whatever ... But, I became a little bit more militant. That's not like me but when it comes to my family, and I see them hurting then I fight harder. I began to be known in the justice system; when I came in they would say, "Oh yes the grandmother is here." I could hear them talking cause they knew I was there for a fight. I wasn't there just to listen. I suppose I became much stronger that way too and I began to know my way around the justice system. I believe that Aboriginal people are not given the benefit of the doubt. Immediately because they are Aboriginal they are told... I don't know, the punishment doesn't fit the crime. My grandson is a...young offender. When you look at the punishment that was given my grandson, he should never have been given that type of a punishment. When you look at the other type of punishments, immediately I did some research, I looked in the paper, and I placed it upon them. I've been complaining about this all along and all of a

sudden somebody began to listen to me because when I said I was going to take them to court themselves and there would be an inquiry. All of a sudden everything changed. So now...whenever I make a call for me to visit my grandson, doors are opening. It never happened before. So I would say that I learned an awful lot as I come along. Not only did I help myself and my family but other people came to me for help. I was able to direct them to people that they could go. I think that the justice system has a long way to go but at least they are trying now. Because more people are being aware and I'm very proud to know that we are getting a lot more Aboriginal people who are more educated now like teachers, social workers, lawyers. And of course in the health system as well.

The justice system, like other government institutions, is foreign and overwhelming, and it is only recently that Aboriginal people began to advocate effectively for changes within it. For example, in recent years a number of justice inquiries have examined the treatment of Aboriginal people in all regions of the country, and these commissions have thoroughly documented the gross inequities in the justice system and recommended that policy makers to begin making fundamental changes to the system.

Throughout the ten learning circles people spoke about the child welfare system in the same way as those who criticized the justice system. Like the justice system, the social services system has been experienced by many people in this study as a massive, complex and foreign bureaucracy that is inaccessible and intimidating. A young woman in the Saskatchewan circle had been adopted by a non-Aboriginal family. This is what she said about its effect on her life:

Family services, social services, the adoption — they deprived me of my family, my language, my culture, my cultural identity for quite some time, any knowledge. They changed me completely from what I could have been.

The adoption policy of sending Aboriginal children to non-Aboriginal homes was an effective assault on not only the identity of Aboriginal youth but their inherent rights as well:

It's an inherent right that is taken away. Even when the child is old enough they won't get that information unless they go searching in the streets for who their people are. They seem to find their people anyway, but the hard way.

For many young people the system is so complex and the relationships to their family and community so distant that they have little chance of retrieving their status as members of their Aboriginal communities or the rights that are guaranteed to Aboriginal people.

With respect to government services the experience Aboriginal people speak of is part of a long-term multi-generational pattern of assimilation. In recent times the pattern included the residential schools, which were a tangible, systematic and broad-ranging undertaking to obliterate Aboriginal cultural identity (see section on education and residential schools below);

many of the children of the people who endured the residential schools ended up in the child welfare system where they were often fostered or adopted into non-Aboriginal homes. The prisons and other justice institutions are now filling up with Aboriginal people who have graduated from the child welfare system; they have become "warehouses for Indians" as one of the inmates put it. These are concrete, modern policies of institutionalized racism that are simply a continuation of a colonial relationship that began at contact and progressed through various schemes devised to rid this continent of Aboriginal people.

Currently, there have been some rare, yet promising, initiatives in some regions of the country. Although they are steps in the right direction, the initiatives are approached with a healthy degree of scepticism on the part of Aboriginal people given the history of mistrust that has been fostered in their relationship with mainstream institutions. Aboriginal people who work at changing the system that controls their lives face long-term, entrenched attitudes that are based in colonial assumptions of superiority. A woman in Saskatchewan used the example of advisory committees to make this point.

But I think it goes further than that. I think it has to do with control. I think it has to do with the policies and the planning that's done for Indian people — they have no say in it. That's one thing that really bugs me, particularly in the city. What happens is that they always come to you and ask you to sit on these advisory boards and they're just token advisory boards. I refuse to sit on those committees any more because what I say to them is that I want to be at the policy and planning level where we're going to say what's going to happen to us and how we're going to do it. And not just token advisory boards where you go and sit on this committee but they don't take your advice anyway.

To work authentically with Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal government and service people need to examine their place of privilege and their attitudes of superiority and race in order to unlearn the colonial biases that inhibit real institutional change. Cultural sensitivity training, though a positive first step, is a very small piece of the change that must occur. And one of the main obstacles to beginning the internal transition for non-Aboriginal policy makers is simply to acknowledge the truth of their own dominance and privilege. Recognizing the legacy of their experience of being socialized in a racist culture forces them to come face to face with their own racism which, for many people, is a shameful and guilt-ridden experience — more so, perhaps, if they are part of a profession that espouses humanitarian ideals.

Education

Aboriginal people in Canada are undertaking an education process that is essentially threefold. First, there is a strong cultural resurgence, an attempt to reclaim the traditions, the rituals, the ceremonies, the languages, the spiritual teachings, the arts and many other facets of the individual nations' cultures as they were practised before the destructive path of colonialism declared all-out war on them. Second, a relearning and rewriting of critical history is also under way. This authentic history seeks to validate significant details of the Aboriginal experience that have been omitted thus far in documenting the heritage of this country. It is the story of life before Europeans came to North America and how Aboriginal people lived through the darkness of colonial genocidal and modern assimilationist policies that sought to obliterate Aboriginal cultures from the North American continent. It exposes the wrath of long-term, pervasive, institutionalized racism. This history also tells of how the Aboriginal nations began to rebuild their despairing cultures from the strands of knowledge that were left in the elders and teachers who carried this information through the devastation. And, third, many people are seeking training in mainstream education institutions to develop skills that are needed in the Aboriginal communities where they live or that will give them access to greater employment opportunities in the mainstream community. For some, this form of education is critical and is aimed at helping them implement solutions in their communities that are more self-determining and seek to deal with the institutional and internalized racism of the past.

This three-pronged approach is necessary for different reasons. Most important, it is necessary because the colonial agenda was partially successful: some nations have been wiped out, some languages are no longer spoken, countless expressions of tradition and culture are no longer practised, and sacred objects fill museums around the world even though they are needed in the communities they were taken from. Rebuilding the knowledge, understanding and skills at the foundation of these cultures is necessary as a result. Further, communities are in a state of devastation and crisis as a result of the long history of racism-fuelled economic, political and social marginalization that has crushed Aboriginal people around the country.

Residential schools

It is difficult to articulate the profound destruction and pain that remains today as the legacy of residential schools for countless Aboriginal people in Canada. In every learning circle a universal

theme was that residential schools amounted to a massive, insidious attack on the very core of Aboriginal cultures. Underpinning the strategy of cultural genocide was the forced division of families and communities. Further the schools used horrendous tactics of manipulation and abuse to teach the young students that their cultures, their languages, their spiritual beliefs were evil and were cause for the harshest eternal punishment. Here is an extended passage from one of the elders in the Saskatoon treaty learning circle. This woman spoke often with great passion and the integrity and depth of lived experience. In this excerpt she speaks of her experience with the residential school.

After from the time I was 7 years old, then my dad was told, because I was supposed to be in the boarding school, the principal was at my dad's place, "Now your daughter is ready to go to school in September. She's 7 years old now, she should be in school — boarding school." And the boarding school was about 7 miles away. It was in this big high building. And I knew, because girls and boys used to run away and end up at my dad's because it was the last place on the reserve, that's where they used to land. Some of them with frozen feet in the winter time, running away from school because they got beaten up. And they told all kinds of horrible stories about that school. And as I grew up I feared that school — I was very scared of that school. I didn't even want to pass near that school because I knew there was something going on in there because they were punished for their language and their culture. And that was the thing I was afraid of the most. And yet at home I was coming from a very protective family, I was happy, nothing to harm me. So now. My dad told me, "You're going to have to go to that school because now is the time for you to go. The principal is going to come and pick you up." And then I'd run away. When I'd see a team of horses — oh they had beautiful horses — when I'd see them coming I'd run away and hide. Even in the winter time, I'd just hide myself in the snow until he would be gone. I did that for one whole year because I was afraid of that school. So now. Finally when I was 8 years old, that February...come September, already that summer — August — my dad was warned, "If your daughter doesn't go to school we're going to send you to jail. You're going to go to jail because you're responsible for your daughter not going to school." And at that time the Indian agent was the judge! The Indian agent would put people in jail at will, just like this, [snaps fingers] without anybody coming to even tell them a story. Just a story. All of a sudden they caught people: thirty days, or two months or whatever. Just listening to the grapevine — gossip! That's how the Indian agent was. So now when he promised my dad he was going to go to jail if I didn't go to school, my dad sat me down and my mom cried and said, because the Indian agent and the principal came to my dad's home, "She goes to school now." It was now end of September, "If your daughter isn't in school by the end of September you go to jail for two months." My mom cried and said, "My girl you'll have to go to school." Knowing very well I'm never going to come home again — maybe we used to have holidays at that time one month in a year. And gradually expanded to a month and a half, two

months, but that took years. So when my dad finally took me at the end of September when I was eight and a half years old, I cried all the way, I held my dad tight — and he was driving a team of horses — and I cried, "Dad don't do this to me!" Everything was in Saulteaux, I didn't know how to speak English. And that's the most horrible thing I was afraid of, because I heard children were beaten for that. And that's what I was afraid of, to be beaten up. That was the big nightmare. So when I got all the way, holding my dad and he was holding me driving the horses, I was crying and I knew he was crying. "Don't do this to me! Don't do this to me!" [says the same thing repeatedly in Saulteaux] Just crying all the way! Then finally we got to the school and the principal knew I was coming because his office was right where he could see the highway and there were steps down. He looked and he could see me; already he was opening the door. So anyway my dad held me by the hand and I was holding him [pleading in Saulteaux] "Take me home." When we reached the door, when the principal was trying to pull me I grabbed my dad. The principal was trying to pull me and my dad was trying to push me but me I was [holding on]. I was holding onto his feet, the principal was trying to pull me and my dad was trying to pull my fingers off his leg and I knew my dad had tears in his eyes. 'Til finally the principal jerked me and my dad pushed me and slammed the door. I screamed! That's all the principal needed was to be alone with me. [motions grabbing her by the shirt/chest area and lifting her up against the wall] My first experience of boarding school, telling me, "Shut up!" [expresses shock] My dad was gone. I didn't know what to do. I was alone with this principal. That's when the superior came down and got me. With my aunt, my mother's sister was the oldest girl in there, she was fifteen, they brought her along. She took me up stairs to go and change me. Then, she told me all the things I had to do: I had to listen, I had to try and learn their language, and mustn't talk my language. Then, they went and cleaned me up. The first thing was a nun standing there with a basin and the scissors in her hand and there was a comb in the basin — a fine comb. My little braids were up to here [down to middle of chest] — on the floor! And they cut me square like this [short in the front and back] and my neck at the back. I was scared, I was shaking but I didn't want to make a noise. That's when she started combing my hair, trying to find lice but I had no lice. Then my aunt took me to the bathroom to give me a good bath. They took all my clothes and they put them in a white bag and they may have burned them I don't know. But anyway, that was the experience I had on my first day in that school. It was a whole terror for me from the start. That was the beginning of a nightmare!

The woman spoke passionately and at length about her experiences at the school and the effect they have had on her life. She was extremely articulate and angry about the entire experience and was able to expose the environment as one motivated completely by the desire to eradicate all traces of Aboriginal identity from its students. Here she shares more details of the setting, the practices of the staff and the impact it had on her.

Everything is half and half. The good part is: the food, we had enough to eat, we had beds, our own beds, and that was nice, that was the good part. Of course I had

that at home too. But mentally [points to head while shaking in disbelief] mentally was the biggest part...that was the beginning of learning that my being an Indian was ugly! Being taught that being an Indian, that I belonged to the devil! That my language belonged to the devil! And the things that I learned at home: respect, and pride, sharing, were all taken away from me [by] those so-called men of God and the women of God! They had big crucifixes, the nuns, and everything and I used to look up and I used to wonder if they were angels from heaven. But what kind of angels could they be the way they would beat us up like that? And yet that's the way it was. So now, as time went on and on everyday I was being told who I wasn't. This is where I learned to hate. How to be ashamed. How not to respect. All that anger was in me now. I began to be ashamed of being an Indian. I began to be ashamed of my language. I began to hate my people, because they were Indian, because they were the cause of me being here. But now I wanted to be white! I wanted to be exactly what the white man's religion and his face and everything. Because they brought big pictures into our school: this was hell, this was purgatory, there was heaven. That's the things we were taught. Here [in one of the pictures] was where all the Indian people belong with their sundances, with their sweatlodges. You see them right in the picture, with a bunch of serpents and devils with horns [and forks] and little kids going to hell with their parents. That picture is somewhere still today. Cause one guy had it as a small picture, he said they have it pinned up in their community way up north. Now, this was purgatory, some people were going into there. Those that were ready to change and go to heaven, want to be like the white man — to throw away their culture, their land, to give up their culture but to be white oriented. Now they can burn in here for some time, their sins are going to be burnt off and they're going to come clean. Then they're going to go to heaven. Oh, well on that road there was a cloud. There was four angels with trumpets, one on each corner and there was a road and a cloud. And on that road there was white people, there was nuns and there were priests — all of them with a big crucifix — going to heaven. I wanted to go there! I didn't want to go here [hell, purgatory]! So I had no use for my culture. I had no use for my language. I had no use for my mother and dad — I hated them! I was ashamed of them! I learned this in an institution of the Roman Catholic church! I learned that that was what they taught us. And a lot of us today wonder why people have no self-esteem, no value, no pride? They taught us that! And who made it like that for us to lose our culture, our language, our identity? That was the system of the government. "Let's build them schools. Take their children away and put them in buildings. Take their language and their culture away so some day they will not know who they are. They will be just a people among many." That's where we're at today. That was the system.

The schools were very good at fulfilling their goals of obliterating Aboriginal cultures in order to further the goals of the government's assimilation agenda. Today the symptoms of the pain and disorientation left by the residential school experience (as well as other similar institutions such as the child welfare and justice systems) are expressed by individuals in self-destructive behaviours such as addictions and suicide. One woman in Victoria, who was

healing from 20 years of alcohol abuse, said this about one of her suicide attempts:

I came close to suicide. The one thing that struck me was: I can't let them do this to me. And I thought, who is "them"? The first thing that came to mind was the people at the residential school.

So many people spoke about the years of darkness and confusion they endured after leaving the residential school. Much of the pain and despair was attributed to the fact that the schools effectively attacked the very fibre of people's sense of identity and esteem as Aboriginal people.

The next most fundamental unit of Aboriginal society that suffered devastation was the family. Like the woman who spoke about her first days in the residential school, the following passage is offered by another woman who, like most people who spoke on these issues, articulated the profound trauma associated with the involuntary destruction of family relationships:

I've had a lot of events in my life that have affected me as a traditional person. [pause, begins crying] Probably the most profound is the residential school. It's an issue that I work on day to day. And it affects me profoundly because I have children. And they say the effects of the residential school system will stay for seven generations. When I went to the residential school conference in Vancouver I kind of sat there and thought: what do I have to cry about? After listening to people's stories that were just horrendous. I wasn't a sexual abuse victim. I wasn't even physically abused. But the emotional abuse, the religion and the confusion that I felt having been brought up in a traditional way. My grandparents were very traditional. And then to go into a residential school system where we were taught and told it didn't matter how holy you were because you would go to hell because you were a Native person. And these were things that were taught to us. All I knew is that I never felt good in residential school. I felt lonely, I didn't see my grandparents. ...And the biggest effect...I always remember my mom was a very kind person, she was very wise and her whole life was put into us kids. I'm the oldest daughter of seven children. And for me to come back from residential school after 8 years and to see my mother and father, who were hard working people who cared about the community before I went to residential school and to come back and find them alcoholics, had a major, major effect on my life. Here is another woman's story about the effects on family relationships:

I think sometimes the unknown is where, a lot of times, you get the alcohol, the drugs, the suicide... I don't know how to explain it but coming from residential school I'm seeing it more and more within our people that we were not taught how to hold our children. I know I've experienced that because... [long pause, starts crying]. It's something really hard to talk about. My youngest son used to come to me and...I always say that he was the one who taught me how to love again. [long pause, crying more] He used to hold me and tell me how much he loved me. It would get to a point where, eventually I would push him away because I didn't

know how to accept all this. Because I never received it from my family because all of us were brought up in residential schools. We didn't know how to hang onto each other. We didn't know how to tell each other that we loved each other. And as a result, I came from a family of 17 before the residential school [pause to cry]...after the residential school, I think now we are a family of 8. Through alcohol, drugs, suicides and suicide attempts — it's just unbelievable! I've tried it. I don't know how many times. Just about succeeded a few times. Because I just didn't know who I was. And it really hurts me because now that I quit drinking and I still see my family involved in the alcohol and they are trying to kill themselves because they don't know who they are. They've lost who they are. They're in the lost world. They don't want to speak about residential school because...it is like an open sore that is there eating at you and you don't know it. You just don't know. And so we bring up our children and we're not teaching them the Native ways and the Native values. So now we're seeing our kids as drug addicts, suicidal, alcoholics, in jails...because they don't know their ways of life. They don't know their histories. We're just not teaching them that. Now that I've turned myself around, I'm really finding it hard to teach my children. They've been growing up and they are so fair [-skinned], they fit into the white community so easily. I think what I did was stereotyped the Indian myself. They don't associate too much with the Natives. Which I feel really bad about because the Native way has so much to teach us. They are good ways. The sharing aspect of all that we own. The loving. The holding of the children. You can't just let everything go. It's a part of you. It really is a part of you.

Repeatedly the participants in the learning circles also spoke about their struggles as parents of the next generation — the second generation of seven, if the seven-generation prediction is correct — of Aboriginal people. Most of the people speaking were survivors of residential schools and so were never socialized to parent effectively, as they were separated from their parents at critical times in their lives. A woman in the Inuvialuit adults circle said this about the dynamic:

They took away those skills that your parents were supposed to bring you up to know, like parenting skills. We lost all that because we were in an institution that didn't foster that kind of environment. There's a huge group of us who had to learn parenting [starts to laugh] shooting from the hip because we didn't know how to parent.

Another voice in the circles was the next generation — the children of survivors of residential schools — who expressed confusion and pain resulting from their parents' inability to parent them in a good way. One young man in the Victoria artists circle captivated the group with his summation of his struggle to heal himself after years of abuse, alcoholism and carrying his father's shame and guilt.

All my life...why? why? why? And I still don't know why. I don't want that for me. I try to seek everything I can get my hands on to protect myself. Every tool,

from quitting drinking to controlling this anger and this rage I carry — that's not even mine. Maybe because of residential school — I don't know. They haven't told me. How can I work on something I don't even know what the reasons were? I struggle with this. I'm just finding out that it wasn't my fault, I wasn't a bad kid. After 22 years — it wasn't me. I'm finding out that it was the system's fault. I still hurt.

Inuvialuit Youth expressed insights similar to this young speaker's. Their focus was on what they wanted to learn from their parents' generation — their language and how to live on the land — and they were also very angry and frustrated that they weren't being given the opportunity because these skills and knowledge were dying in the community as a result of many different forces including the residential schools. One young woman said of the effects she perceived the residential school had had on her generation, "It's hurting us because we can't communicate with our elders that well." The elders, to this group of young people, were a revered life support, a storehouse of vital knowledge and experience about their ancestors, their language and their culture.

So there are repercussions on successive generations of Aboriginal people and there will be for some time to come. Given that the residential school system was the most significant early relationship that Aboriginal nations had with non-Aboriginal educational institutions, and putting issues of racism and cultural appropriateness aside, one can understand the long-standing, profound breakdown of trust engendered by the government of Canada in its relationship with Aboriginal peoples through these early education policies and practices. Further, one can also understand a substantial lack of desire, on the part of successive generations of Aboriginal people, voluntarily to submit themselves or their children to another educational institution given the horrendous effects of residential schools on their lives, their families, their communities and their nations.

Focusing on the post-residential school era, many participants shared their experiences of the mainstream education system which was, for some people, as bad as or worse than the residential schools their parents or grandparents went to. Most participants in this study attest to the fact that the education they did get in mainstream schools was at best guilty of a complete omission of the Aboriginal reality. At its worst the education was an all-out attack on Aboriginal culture, as was the case in the residential schools and in public school classrooms controlled by racist and abusive teachers. In the middle ground people spoke of teachers who were openly racist or who relied on stereotyped portrayals of Aboriginal people for their curriculum. Here is

an example of a young man coping with conflicting accounts of history:

Hopefully people accept what we're telling them. A lot of people say, "Where's the proof?" Well, where's your proof? — saying who's right? ...a lot of people go by documentation. When I was going to school people would say, "It's written here right in the books." And I'd say, "Well that's not what my father told me or my grandfather didn't say that's right." And I'm going by...word of mouth. And then my father would tell me to just believe what they said at school. He wanted me to finish school so I had to go by what they were saying.

This man could articulate the ways he had to deny his own history and culture in order to survive in the mainstream system of education that was the gateway to other resources such as legitimacy and employment. Another woman gave an example from one of her high school textbooks that also illuminates the importance of perspective in the writing of history:

What really made an impact in my life is grade nine social studies. I remember I was sitting in class one time in grade nine. And the text books were given — this bugged me for the rest of my life and I swore one day I was going to find out the truth — I read in this grade nine social studies book that Big Bear and his people massacred the people in Fort Pitt while they were sleeping. Then General Steel defeated Big Bear at Steel Narrows. And for the longest time it really really bothered me because why did they label Big Bear and his tribe massacre — the choice of the words, eh? And then when General Steel and his army "defeated" Big Bear at Steel Narrows they built up a big monument. Steel Narrows is a historic sight and where's Big Bear in all of this? As I grew up I asked questions and the people at the Little Lake band say that the same events occurred, Big Bear and his people were attacked while they were asleep. And yet Steel and his men did not "massacre" Big Bear and his tribe, they "defeated" him — while he was asleep. And that made me to be...the way I think, the way I speak and everything else. Because I always determined that one day I would find out the true story behind it. And it made me to see that I was a Native person in a White school, learning a White school system. And what that said to me was: Native people are savages, White people are noble. And the prejudice and racism that is taught in our education system to our children. And to this day I have never found out if that social studies book is outdated or anything — I never did go back to find out. But that made a big impact in my life to help me deal with racism and prejudice and be proud of who I am.

The omission of Aboriginal reality, the Aboriginal perspective, in the writing of history and in the education curriculum is completely invalidating for Aboriginal people and has left generations feeling invisible without the ability to understand or articulate the pain and suffering they see around them in their lives.

The theme of education came up repeatedly in all the learning circles; relearning their languages and traditions, rebuilding their families and communities is central to the collective consciousness of Aboriginal identity in Canada today. As part of the need to rebuild communities

there is also a massive push for Aboriginal people of all ages to seek education in order to acquire the skills needed for this process. For example, in many of the circles many participants saw education as a tool to take back to their communities. One of the Halifax woman shared this example from her life:

I felt that I gained more knowledge here [in the mainstream community], getting employed, everything that circumferenced me in my life came from here but I am able to take that home, what I've learned, through my knowledge. And now I am able to use it there. Whereas before I wasn't able to because I had nothing when I was there.

Others felt that education would give them the skills to survive in mainstream society, as they either had no significant links to an identifiable community or they simply chose to live outside that community and return to it occasionally to nurture important relationships and obtain cultural information and resources.

If it is used appropriately education can be fundamental to the healing process. More than one inmate described their time in the prison as a "vision quest" or a time of healing, learning and refocusing for direction.

So in a lot of ways my thinking process has changed a lot. I'm kind of glad that, in a sense, I learned...as [another member of the circle] said, we are in a vision quest here because some of us we are actually just learning about our culture. Like a sweatlodge, sweet grass, sage, cedar — what they really mean. And how you can use these medicines to help yourself heal. But in the urban centre there's nothing, when I was there...there was a lack of it.

Though the Stoney Mountain Penitentiary had many faults in the eyes of the Aboriginal inmates, some were thankful for their opportunity to concentrate on learning about their culture while in prison. The learning opportunity was in large part created through the efforts of the inmates themselves and the advocacy work of the Native Brotherhood Organization who fight relentlessly for more culturally appropriate programs in the prison.

Another young man spoke about the alternative high school he attends in Saskatoon. What he found most important about the high school was that it incorporates healing into the curriculum:

...it's a really good high school. It teaches the culture and shows that education is healing. They take time to get to know the student because they are caregivers. And they don't put everything black and white...they teach you how to be proud and things like that...there are elders at the school...

[later on the same theme]...we have healing circles in the morning. A lot of

kids go in there and they don't even know who they are. They are ashamed of being Indian. When they go there they learn more about their culture and they start a healing process. A lot of them go into treatment and stuff like that.

This high school is part of the mainstream education system and clearly has been able to develop curriculum that is relevant and empowering for Aboriginal people.

Media

My biggest influence was the TV — that's what made me ashamed of being an Indian. Watching Indians being killed in western movies all the time and not being accepted anywhere had a very serious impact on my life, as to who I wanted to be and what I wanted to be. So I had a lot of negative thoughts about being Native and I had a lot of resentment.

News and entertainment media are among the most powerful influences on people's perception of reality. Television, radio, newspapers, film, video and print are all in the business of creating knowledge and distributing information. In a capitalist democracy these institutions hold immense political and economic clout; as a result, what becomes 'news' or 'history' is a matter of what will sell to the most people and ensure the greatest return of capital influence. In the process the values and norms of the dominant society are shaped and reinforced. So in a system based on these principles, reality is whatever sells and what sells reflects the values and norms of the dominant society. Underlying these economic and political motivations is the racist ideology of colonization, which seeks to maintain a power imbalance that perpetrates the oppression and inferiority of Aboriginal peoples. In large part, history from the perspective of Aboriginal people is simply omitted from the discourse of mainstream popular culture. It is knowledge that is not worthy of production because it does not ensure a suitable economic gain. It also would be threatening to the status quo, since a major power shift would need to occur.

The effect of this gross invalidation on the cultural identity of Aboriginal people has been devastating. A man in the Victoria Métis circle, who had worked in the media industry since the 1960s, summed up the effect of media on urban Aboriginal people this way:

Within the Aboriginal community, the more isolated you are the better chance you have of maintaining your culture. Because of urbanization there is a lot of pressure for Aboriginal people to conform to something they don't understand. In the urban environment Native people are lost, almost as though they've gone invisible. You look inside and you can't find yourself. You look in the mirror and there is nobody there. That's because our mirror has become the television. Now media unloads images on us and you cannot identify yourself because for Native people we don't see ourselves in any of it. Things are changing, in "North of 60"

— Tom Jackson appears in the program, a Native guy, plays band manager or chief. And another Native woman plays the RCMP. Both are breaking down stereotypes. For example, the chief as dictator, that's not the case in this program; the humanity is portrayed well. We need to better represent ourselves in the media institutions... in conclusion, I'll say that if we are invisible in the market place we have to get visible so we have to draw on our own energy and the systems that are available to us such as the media.

Until recently, the Aboriginal reality — their story — simply did not exist in the books read at school, in newspapers, on the radio, on television or in movies. Education is central to the media role and education reform, on issues specific to Aboriginal people, is only beginning to take place after generations have relied on bad stereotypes and misinformation (based on fear and ignorance) for their education. To this end an authentic retelling of the history of Aboriginal people is surfacing in the media and, though slight, it is validating their reality and is a sign of hope and pride for the people who view it. Repeatedly, people stated that they wanted more culturally relevant, historically accurate curriculum in the schools. Consistently, participants in the circles spoke of rare books, videos, movies and television programs they saw that were authentic and, accordingly, strengthened or enhanced their Aboriginal identity. It is also, as the man in the Métis circle suggests, important for Aboriginal people themselves to harness some of the power of the media to promote their own path of self-determination and healing; but the barriers to access to these institutions must be addressed and removed for this to occur.

One specific recent example of how the media can affect the cultural identity of Aboriginal people, in different ways, was the blockade at Kanesatake (or Oka) in the summer of 1990. It was an issue that many participants raised during the ten learning circles, for different reasons. For the most part people around the country said that the incident made them proud of their Aboriginal identity because it was the first time they saw Aboriginal people take such a strong public stand against the Canadian government represented by the police and military. Some people also stated that the incident raised their political consciousness, where before they had considered themselves politically inactive or indifferent. Interestingly, the participants in the Quebec learning circle had mixed opinions about the impact of the event. Though some felt the media depiction renewed a sense of Aboriginal pride and strength, others felt it stimulated a negative backlash that diminished public support for Aboriginal people. All these perceptions — on the part of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike — are moulded by media portrayals of the events at Kanesatake. People had access to this story almost entirely through the media. It

was a part of their lives because of the media. Clearly, there was a choice about how the story was told, a choice that could result in specific social and political outcomes. The following excerpts are from three different people in the Saskatchewan treaty circle; they made these comments about the perspective of their local media institutions:

It's like this in the media: I got ganged up on by a whole bunch of white guys one time. Did it make the news? No. But as soon as we go and gang up on a white person, Boom! It's in the media and it's all over. They exploit us too much!

And you take that a little further, when they video tape skid row or the streets, when they do this program on street life, well, who's the street life? Native people. And prostitution? Well there's only Native people there that are being shown as prostitutes. What about all the white people that are there? White people get drunk in the bar and walk down the streets.

I guess you can reverse that too. If there's an Indian event in town or if there is an Indian person who does something really terrific, it's never on the front page, it would be stuck somewhere in the back pages.

Further, the people who control the media institutions, the people who tell the story, are, with few exceptions, non-Aboriginal. The documentary "Kanesatake: 270 Years of Resistance", by director Alanis Obomsawin, was a telling of the same story but from the Aboriginal perspective, and one can see striking contrasts between it and the portrayal offered by the mainstream media. This is only one example of a story that made it to the front page of newspapers around the world because of its marketability; what about all the other stories that did not make it because they were not dramatic enough to sell news or books or television shows?

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professionals involved in the production of radio, television, film and print media must be aware of the long-lasting and potentially important impact these media works can have on the Aboriginal community. Media, in this light, can be a social catalyst — an instrument of healing and change — in the gathering of content, the production and the presentation of ideas that influence the lives of those who view and take part in the process.

Language

A lot of us felt less 'Indian' because we could not speak the language. Language is a fundamental tool for the expression of self, so much so that the language itself is sometimes considered a part of identity. Language is one of the primary tools for communicating

ideas and expressing one's perceptions of the world. In the ten learning circles it was clear that most of the participants felt that language is central to their cultural identity. Culture is intrinsic to the way language is used. Languages vary, just as cultures vary, depending on the nation and where that nation lives, so there may be many dialects within nations.

Aboriginal languages in every region of the country are in a state of crisis; many of them are already extinct, and others are on the brink of extinction, with very few speakers still living. The residential school system was extremely effective in replacing countless cultural traditions and practices — including language — with abuse, shame and confusion. One of the men in the Victoria artists circle spoke about the painful silence he endured during and after his time in the school:

I was deprived of many things when I went to residential school, the biggest thing was my language. I was silenced for quite a number of years. When I got back to Vancouver I really didn't know what to do, the only way I could feel courageous was to drink and then I would defend myself using swear words. When I sobered up I was right back to feeling defeated. I really didn't know how to communicate with other people. It really showed when my dad died and I went back to the community at this time. Being the eldest son I was to speak. I just felt lost. I didn't know what to say. I know my Indian language to hear it but I just couldn't speak it so I had to get my uncle to speak for me because I couldn't do it myself. I felt ashamed that I couldn't speak for my family. I felt like people were looking at me and calling me a dumb Indian or something. At home I felt like people pushed me aside, like I didn't belong there because I was gone for a long time. I felt a lot of relief when I went back to the city.

Many people who spoke in the circles felt the same type of profound inadequacy because they could not speak their language — even though it was clearly beyond their power to control whether they were able to. In general, the pattern we observed most often was that the people in these circles who attended residential school spoke their language fluently before going to the schools — many were taught by a grandparent because their parents could no longer speak their language — but by the time they left the schools they had only memories of certain words — barely enough to communicate or speak fluently. Some of those people were lucky enough to come from a strong family or community that supported them in regaining the use of their language. Most people were less fortunate and after leaving the residential school they never regained the language they once spoke fluently, so many of their children also grew up without learning their language. Now, language programs for children are only beginning to develop in the schools and in some urban and rural community learning centres.

Today the languages are used — for the daily business of the community — in relatively few rural and virtually no urban Aboriginal communities. In many cases there are not enough speakers to revive the use of the language in the community. Even where there are classes there must be an enormous output of energy, time and commitment to ensure that people develop an understanding of the use and meaning of the language, not simply the ability to memorize lists of isolated words. One or two classes a week is insufficient to learn to communicate with any language; there must be some degree of consistent immersion for people to begin to learn to think and express themselves in their language. Further, this degree of immersion also takes tremendous financial resources, which are rarely available in the community to begin with and are often not a priority for government decision makers considering other more pressing social and economic issues in many Aboriginal communities. On top of all these barriers is the fact that even though people express a desire to learn their language, a context that would support and nurture their learning process is inaccessible to them.

Since the context and the resources, especially for urban people, are so rare, technologies are being developed and used to help overcome some of these barriers and to slow the gradual death of many languages. Specifically, with the use of video cameras, computers and CD-ROM technology and, of course, elders and resource people, some nations are creating data bases of their languages to ensure accessibility for generations to come. For example, some language programs allow the user to call up words or phrases on a video screen where an elder says the word so that the student can hear and see how it is articulated. Still, the task of simply storing the vast amounts of information that make up a language is immense, given all the cultural forms and context that involve its use, such as life ways, stories, songs and ceremonies. Additionally, these technologies are rare and expensive at present, but with development their accessibility and use will increase. One woman in the Victoria artists circle who worked with many Aboriginal communities around the issue of language development suggested that for people (especially urban people) who do not have the supportive learning environment to develop their language skills the technology may be used as an important aid. Effective interactive language programs can be developed in the Aboriginal community where the language is alive and used in the home by urban people. This learning material could also be supplementary to contact with resource people through classes — beginning daily with children in the schools and continuing all the way up to university courses — or mentor relationships. At

present, although they are rare, there are some new programs in public education institutions to teach Aboriginal languages; these programs have been developed almost entirely from the determination and will of Aboriginal people. There are substantial examples of effective French immersion programs in the public education system that successfully help people to learn to speak French. Except for lack of political will there is no reason why more resources cannot be directed to the development of similar programs for Aboriginal languages.

Spirituality

The spirit world is as important as the material world so I try to remain open to all teachings in what ever form they come.

This woman from the Victoria artists circle articulates what others implied or stated about the central place of the spirit world in their lives and their identity. The values, traditions and beliefs — expressed in ritual, ceremony and life choices — are linked directly to the people's relationship with the Great Spirit and all of creation. In the different urban settings the methods of expressing spirituality differ depending on the nations that populate each of those centres and the individuals themselves. The awakening and nurturance of one's spirituality was also significantly related to healing or feeling whole and well within oneself. The colonization experience — most notably the residential schools — has been the main source of disruptions in the practice of traditional spirituality in Aboriginal communities. As a result, modern Aboriginal people choose a variety of different traditions to express and understand their spiritual reality. Specifically, one can see a spectrum of belief patterns ranging from committed traditionalists to people who are dedicated to mainstream Judaeo-Christian spiritual disciplines and religions. There are also Aboriginal people who have adopted Christianity into their belief system and refuse their own Aboriginal spirituality in reaction to the racism and lack of mainstream support for traditional expressions of spirituality. Another group of people is transitional; they incorporate parts of both perspectives in their daily lives and the way they understand the world. Lastly, there is a group of people who feel confused; they are unsure which, if either, perspective they wish to have in their lives. In all the circles there was agreement that colonization was destructive to Aboriginal peoples and that their spiritual life was one of the earliest targets of the assimilation campaign. In the Winnipeg inmates circle one of the men eloquently stated what was expressed, in a variety of ways, throughout the ten circles:

I think what made it easier for the government to suppress my people, denying us our way of life, like the ways we worship the Creator. It made it easier for them to justify a lot of the things they had done to try to take away the spirit of the people. But individually that spirit is still here. That's what I find about the culture here, I am awakened to a lot of things about my spirit. It's making me stronger and that's what my people need; every one of us need that kind of contact with the Creator. You can't sever that; each human being needs that. I think that's what the government tried to do, they tried to weaken us in that way.

Throughout the ten circles men and women also focused on the important role of the elders and spiritual teachers (see the section on elders, below); their relationship to the people is essential for the development and continuity of spiritual well-being. Regardless of how individuals choose to express themselves, elders and teachers are necessary to answer questions about spirituality: what it is, what it means and how it is practised. Participants in the learning circles consistently expressed a need to understand and deepen their relationship to creation and the Great Spirit by understanding their spirituality, the path of life and death and what is beyond the physical realm. The elders and other spiritual teachers have always been key resources in Aboriginal communities for these reasons. The following passage is from a woman in the Saskatchewan treaty group who articulated her process of reclaiming her traditional Aboriginal method of spiritual worship and her belief in the elders.

...I don't want these grandchildren to be suffering like me and their grandpa who have tried to be Catholic and messing around with that and it never done me any good. So one day, I was about 31 years old, I woke up and made a decision that I'm not going to church no more. I'm just going to honour my Creator the way my ancestors did and since then I've been doing that. And I told the children, "If you want to continue to go to church you're on your own, but I'm not going anymore." So my whole family quit going to church. After that we still are the Creator's children; we pray, but our way. So that helps, right now, what they're doing now is they're taking our drums and our pipes back into that church to try and suck us back in there, eh? But I quit being a fool now. I'm not going to fall for that. I'll go to my elders and that's where my strengths lie today.

People's connection with the spiritual part of themselves needs to be normalized — not degraded, ridiculed or considered unusual. Often, Aboriginal people mask or restrain their questions about their dreams, visions or other spiritual experiences because they are labelled crazy or schizophrenic if they express them openly. Additionally, Christian celebrations and rites dominate the mainstream calendar year while Aboriginal people have been deprived of the opportunity to practise and honour their own ways — this pattern is highly invalidating and is a gross omission of many Aboriginal people's reality. Underpinning this omission is the historical

campaign of cultural destruction aimed at obliterating Aboriginal spiritual practices. Today people struggle with profound family and community divisions as a result of tensions between the traditional Aboriginal spirituality and the various Christian religions that have taken root in Aboriginal communities. For example, one man in the Winnipeg inmates group stated that at his father's funeral "a fight almost broke out because I want to have a feather and a braid of sweetgrass with him [in the casket] — that's crazy, to me!" Another woman from the Halifax circle shared her experience:

They are trying to do more things like pow wows and stuff, but the Catholic Church is still involved in it so that makes me angry and I stay away. I don't bother getting involved because it will just cause conflict with the people who are still involved with the Catholic Church. For example, my grandmother is still a strong Catholic. When I read books and articles about the residential schools it just angers me. I have family, an aunt who is a nun; what am I suppose to do? If I defy the Catholic church than am I defying my family.

Many Aboriginal people mourn the loss of traditional ceremonies that marked rites of passage, such as burial or death ceremonies, female and male rites of transition into adulthood, birthing rituals and midwifery practices, naming ceremonies, healing and cleansing rites. Aboriginal peoples' spiritual practices have never been honoured or recognized by mainstream society. (It is ironic that one of the favoured stereotypes of Aboriginal people is that they are all spiritual mystics.) Baptisms, Christmas, Easter, and many other Judaeo-Christian celebrations have been imposed historically through the colonial partnership of church and state. These celebrations are not part of traditional Aboriginal cultures, but they are practised in many communities today. The ethnocentrism of mainstream society is expressed through intolerance and disrespect for the spiritual beliefs and practices of Aboriginal peoples. The result is that many Aboriginal people feel crazy and invalidated — as though something is wrong with them. Further, even though the initial work of the colonial missionaries and the residential schools has been replaced by the politics of 'liberal democracy' their code of intolerance has been internalized by Aboriginal people and is now alive and well in their own families and communities. Deep chasms divide communities, with the traditional on one side and the church on the other. The forced estrangement from their traditional spiritual beliefs and practices has created a fear-based response to the unfamiliar, and many people have become distrustful and afraid of what was at one time integral to their ancestors' way of life and identity. Participants expressed a lot of grief over the loss and confusion about spiritual relationships to the Creator

and creation. A process needs to be established that will begin addressing the confusion and work toward healing people's spirits.

Another important issue for many participants revolved around the question of how spirituality can grow, thrive and be nurtured in urban settings. Often there are few people and insufficient resources to support this type of growth. For example, where can people in urban settings have access to a private gathering place, preferably a land base, in which to practise and carry out their spiritual traditions? A land base for gatherings and celebrations is highly important, as are the elders and other important resource people who facilitate these events. Respect for diversity needs to be fostered in non-Aboriginal society — through, for example, education and media institutions — so that Aboriginal people can freely practise their spirituality. The spiritual practices must become visible and accessible to urban Aboriginal people; they can no longer be suppressed without negatively effecting the wellness of Aboriginal identity.

An elder in the Saskatoon treaty circle spoke often on spiritual issues; in the following passage he emphasizes the significance of spirituality to a sense of identity and life according to Ojibwa teachings:

So when we talk about life I think that one of the most important concepts to realize is that we, as Native people, have a spiritual side. That spiritual side, we as human beings must try to find a balance that suits us, our families and our communities. That's the key. However we do that is up to us because we were also given free will by the Creator.... That's why we smudged this morning. That's why I smudge every morning. Because I don't want my free will to disrespect anyone or any person who says or does something throughout this day. That's what I want to do. That's a teaching from our people: to always be honest, try to share, try to be kind and most important, to have faith. I too had to go back to the elders to try to re-learn cultural identity.... We are given ceremonies, rituals, languages. We are given different cultural things to do, to help us, whatever nation we come from. This is my understanding.

...But in cultural identity...there seems to be some similarities and it has a lot to do — in my own tradition — is spiritual identity includes the knowledge of who you are in a spiritual sense. And that's related to the clan system of the Ojibwa people. My father and my father's father all the way down the line, there's an animal spirit that was given to them from the Creator himself a long time ago. And that was cut off when I went to the residential school. They never talked to me about that anymore. I lost it, misplaced it, I had to re-find it. To me that's very important as far as spiritual and cultural identity is concerned. Of course the other one is the Indian name they call me.... So as individuals in my Ojibwa philosophy we are encouraged to find out who we are and how we are connected to the spiritual part of us — through the clan, the Indian name, and we also have colours, like auras. We are born with that. If you are a Native person you are automatically

born with all this. The job of the grandparents, the elders is to bring that out through the ceremonies. Like all of you that don't know your totem or your colour spirit or your Indian name — it's in here [pointing to his heart]. You have to go to an elder to get it out — that's all, it's simple. But yet it's hard because we've been dominated by the Christian churches.

In this man's words we can understand the link between spiritual practices, values and the life of the individual. Also, like participants in many of the circles, he outlines how the residential school was the breaking point of generations of spiritual and cultural tradition and his subsequent efforts to heal from the effects it has had on his life. Later this man shared with the group his feelings of excitement at being able to witness and take part in the healing path of the present generation of Aboriginal people.

Because of intolerance and lack of respect on the part of the dominant religious organizations, Aboriginal people were forced to mask their identity with alien concepts. The spiritual vacuum that resulted left significant gaps in the transmission of spiritual knowledge in Aboriginal communities, and now there is great confusion around authenticity with respect to beliefs and values of nations in all regions of the country. This time of confusion and uncertainty is a prime arena for the infiltration of pan-Aboriginal and 'new age' formulae and prescriptions of what the 'Indian way' ought to look like. Members of the Métis circle in Winnipeg were very critical of pan-Aboriginal organizations, stating that it is one more strategy for assimilation, as it effectively removes the distinctness of individual nations to form a generic 'Aboriginal' group. But treating all Aboriginal nations as one is only convenient for government service delivery. In the end, cultural appropriations and voyeuristic perceptions of what spirituality and culture ought to be do not necessarily reflect the authentic values, beliefs and traditions of Aboriginal peoples.

Again, the imposition of European religions and philosophies has significantly and negatively affected Aboriginal peoples' sense of well-being and identity at its core; it has distorted their relationship to themselves, to each other and, most important, to the Great Spirit — Giichi Manitou in the Ojibwa tradition. Processes must be established in the urban centres that reflect the significance of spirituality as a fundamental component of Aboriginal identity, and its ability to strengthen identity and foster well-being must not be underestimated.

We should not rely on other foreign cultures. They've never helped us. The only thing they did not try was our own spirituality to solve the problems. And yet spirituality is the foundation for us — it was always the foundation. I asked the old man, "Where did my great great grandfather go to church?" And he looked at me as if I was crazy.

This quotation from an elder in the Saskatchewan treaty group is a fitting end to our discussion of spirituality and change in the urban setting.

Land and Nature

Today, the white man gives money as legacy to his children. For the Innu, it is different. They give, as a legacy to the younger generations, the use of the land and its resources. But, with sorrow in my heart, I have to tell you that you have to claim your legacy from the white man. They took away, from you and from me, your legacy.

This man, a participant in the Quebec circle, poignantly expressed how the land and natural resources are a legacy to the Innu people; he also describes the incredible sorrow at the loss of this fundamental aspect of Aboriginal cultural identity. In Canada Aboriginal peoples have not left their homeland, and their connection to the land is spiritually based and connected to the Creator. An elder in the Saskatoon treaty circle expressed the extent of this responsibility when she said:

We didn't come from the Bering Strait or whatever theories are put in books — we were always here! ...There's many stories that you've got to understand as Indian people what kind of culture we really have and our beliefs and the way that the Creator set his laws here on earth for the Indian people to live by.

Aboriginal people's relationship to the land is paramount, and the legacy of the land is fundamental to generational family ties which are the main corridors in the transmission of cultural identity. Without a land base Aboriginal peoples' ability to pass on their legacy to younger generations is profoundly altered. Fundamentally, the land — which is a critical setting for the transmission of traditional knowledge or the educational arena for Aboriginal nations — has been removed. Today education has been replaced by mainstream institutions that lack relevant curriculum and are ignorant of Aboriginal perspectives. These settings only invalidate and assault the well-being of Aboriginal students.

In general, land is significantly related to spirituality, education, economics, politics and social welfare. The resistance, struggles and claims with respect to land are about keeping the heritage of Aboriginal people alive and intact. This is the responsibility of each generation. Nations express their identity as Aboriginal people within their relationship to the land and the Creator by hunting, fishing, trapping, harvesting the fruits of the forest. The land is the source of all life and creation. Stories, songs, dances, ceremonies and art all express the importance of the natural world that sustains the human community. For the Inuvialuit, trapping and hunting were

their traditional livelihood. The Métis were buffalo hunters and farmers. On the coastal areas it was fishing and harvesting sea life. A land base is essential for this way of life and without it, Aboriginal cultures are in jeopardy. In urban settings there is no land base for Aboriginal peoples to use. This must be addressed and rectified.

Aboriginal people's relationship to the land is also at the mercy of the media and the international economies. For example, fur markets that were integral to the subsistence of the Inuvialuit were essentially wiped out through the anti-fur campaign of environmental groups led by Greenpeace. Inuvialuit people stated that the prices of fur drastically declined to a point where trapping has become economically infeasible. People are forced to give up their traditional livelihood, relocate to where there is work (usually that means menial labour in the larger population centres), or go on welfare and become dependent on government. Although the land was a common thread throughout all learning circles, it was particularly strong in the Inuvialuit youth and adult circles. There was a lot of discussion about "being out on the land" and their dependence on and close connection to the land. One man in the Inuvialuit circle stated: "In the winter I used to trap. Then Greenpeace came. The muskrat was about \$13 top price at one time. A lot of us quit the oil patch just to go back on the land. But after that [arrival of Greenpeace] we had to go back to the oil patch." Another of the Inuvialuit adults stated the following:

The other thing that comes to mind is our fur markets. I have a son who stays out at our camp the year round, a friend of his stays with him. And I have to work and try and make money to try and make sure he's got gas. He phoned last night to say he was just about out and now I've got to find gas to get out there because we planned on staying out there too. But he's caught some furs this winter...but for the prices we get for our fur, it's absolutely impossible for him to even pay for the amount of gas he's used over the winter. So that runs into a problem because a lot of people right now who are working probably wouldn't be working if they could make a living off the land. ...it's forced people to move [into town].

Socially, the land provided a place where people would collectively work together. The land provided food and clothing that was shared and distributed among the community; essentially it was the basis of social welfare within families and communities. One of the Winnipeg inmates describes his experience in this way:

Hunting and trapping also played a key role in the way I was brought up because I was taught that whenever you were hunting and trapping you were providing for people. So, whenever I shot a deer I gave a lot of the meat away to the older people. Because when I was young it was the older people hunting and they gave the food to my dad which provided for our family. So when I grew up I did the same thing.... That's a big part of our cultural identity — hunting and trapping —

maintaining that!

Aboriginal cultures are a reflection of their environment and natural surroundings. The regional differences in land, water and resources are a source of diversity among Aboriginal cultures. A young man from the Inuvialuit youth circle described cultural diversity this way:

If there's a family skinning caribou, one group will start with the legs first and another group will skin a caribou starting with the belly first — they've grown up differently. They have a different culture.... It means that people do things differently. Culture is a way of organizing your life...and a way of doing things.... I used to live in Cambridge Bay ...when I came here the language dialect was different, a lot of things were different. Here the dog team they use a straight line dog team because of the bush. In Cambridge Bay the dog team is spread out — in the tundra there's no trees. So that's one difference in culture.

In a simple yet effective way this young man was able to recognize and show respect for these cultural differences. Differences are apparent in a multitude of areas in the daily lives of people from different regions. For example, traditional clothing has floral designs for people of the bushlands or linear images reflecting the mountain landscapes in other regions. The members of the Métis learning circle also emphatically expressed the importance of respecting the distinctness of all Aboriginal nations. One of the women in the circle used the term "pan-Aboriginalism" as a way of describing the opposite. In her words,

...they try to round up a bunch of brown faces and make them all the same...a form of subtle assimilation. Trying to say you're nothing different than the rest of us, putting together non-status, off-reserve Indians and Métis and making it sound like we are all a part of one cultural identity, one cultural group — and we're not! There are some people that are a little bit confused about their identity or maybe aren't as strong in their sense of community and feel that maybe this is the way to belong to an Aboriginal group. And they go off with these pan-Aboriginal organizations...and sort of lose their identity. I know a lot of people that are having a hard time with their cultural identity, being Métis, and not being with a lot of people who are Métis, experiencing that and knowing how it feels. So they go off and get into First Nations religions or whatever and believe that's Métis. That is part of the problem with pan-Aboriginal organizations, they confuse people. People who maybe don't have the supports or strength in the city, or family supports or whatever.

In short, homogenous recipes or solutions — for policy and services — are unable to recognize or respect the cultural diversity that exists in among the Aboriginal nations of Canada.

Land claims and treaties — existing and newly negotiated ones — are the only avenues available to Aboriginal peoples to secure their responsibility and relationship to the land and, accordingly, to strengthen their identity. These treaties and land claims must be recognized and dealt with. Profound feelings of mistrust and suspicion were expressed by participants in the

circles stemming, from the fact that Aboriginal peoples' concerns and federal treaty obligations have not been honoured. Aboriginal people feel they have been cheated and deceived so they are very sceptical of government in this arena. Many people spoke about the fiduciary responsibilities that the federal government has not honoured even though the treaties were sacred documents that Aboriginal leaders signed under the direction of the Creator. A woman from the Saskatoon circle shared this account:

When they signed those treaties...they [the representatives of the Crown] said, "We will put, on your reserves, a school when you are ready. We will give you teachers, when you are ready." Then they [Aboriginal leaders] told them that they wanted their children to be educated...at the highest level. "Granted!" Health, "We will look after your health too — the medicines and everything." ...And to teach them how to survive on farming. "We will give you the equipment and teach you how to farm...a team of oxen and everything you need." Anybody who wants to be a farmer today they can't get nothing from the government... They told them: "You will never go to war because we will protect you...you won't have to take up arms." Because the queen said, "You are my children. I will look after you." ... "You will never starve again because I will be there to give you food because you are my children." So now what's happening, they used to give rations to our people...because that's when they had nothing. Right after the treaties were signed the government put up another policy, the *Indian Act*. That was the beginning of the crookedness...they used the *Indian Act* to divide the nations. Before we were close, we didn't care who came in our home because that was our people, we loved everybody. Today if you go on the reserve...people of all races are accepted.... We don't discriminate them. Who discriminates them? The *Indian Act*! Because that was the law of the white man. That was written without even an Indian being involved. That's why there's so much of this turmoil going on because the government is trying to cheat that treaty. Look at the resources they took away alone! Every time I see a trailer or a truck with lumber — we never gave that up they just took it away! ...stealing it in front of us. We never gave that up. When did we make a treaty on the resources? When did we make a treaty on the minerals they take away? — the gold and the gas and everything they take away from the ground. We never made treaties on that, they just took it away. The government owes us lots and they have the gall to say that we are a tax burden to them. That's our land! Are they going to tax us for our land! They should be thankful that they are here. They should respect us but no they have to find ways and means to build hate with other people. And I blame education for that.

The general public does not understand the nature of treaties and land claims and this ignorance fuels hatred and fear. The government has never instituted any campaign of accurate information to dispel the myths and fears and deal with the ignorance. The prevailing lack of education and the continued existence of misinformation maintain racist ideologies and serve to extend the colonial oppression the Aboriginal people must endure. Generally, people need to be

authentically and critically educated about Aboriginal peoples and their relationship to the land.

Many Aboriginal people have also stated that they have answers to environmental problems because of this sacred relationship. The land is sacred and anything related to it becomes sacred too. This is a fundamental belief across Canada and all Aboriginal nations. For urban people this is a paramount concern: without a recognized land base, cultural identity will only continue to be diminished. The land is significant to identity in terms of cultural values, beliefs, traditional practices, food, clothing, shelter, politics, economics, spirituality and education. Without the land, the process of learning and strengthening one's identity becomes a difficult task.

Elders

Throughout the ten circles elders were often referred to for their importance in providing guidance, clarity and interpretations of the traditional teachings and stories of each nation. Their contributions and roles as authentic teachers and record keepers of the past are immeasurable. They are also valued for their interpretations of the traditional for contemporary and future applications. There was a consistent and resounding appeal from participants in all regions stating the need to have culture, history, traditional knowledge, languages, values and spiritual understandings passed down from the elders. As well, it was consistently recognized that venues in which this transmission of vital cultural information could actually occur are lacking and are much needed. The elders are the key holders of this knowledge and time and time again they were the people that participants in the study wanted so desperately to have access to.

The participants also raised the issue of unhealthy elders who do not understand their role or the significance of their position and, as a result, they end up abusing their power and position in the communities where they live and work. Some elders do not fully recognize the impact they have on those who seek counsel from them. The reciprocal role for the youth and adults to help elders heal also highlights the younger generation's desire to have healthy elders. The elders too have suffered and endured through horrendous living conditions and racist government policies and they have not been untouched by these assaults. Throughout the colonial campaign of cultural genocide their place, their role, in the communities nearly became obsolete. The following quote exemplifies this point.

I think one of the most important things I'd like to mention is that the role of elders was completely dissolved. Their teachings, their decision making, all that was taken away from them. They were made to feel useless. They were just there to grow old and die. [How?] Through residential schools, we weren't allowed to speak our language, not allowed to practise our culture. It was taboo to practise any of these things. That was made clear to elders too. They weren't allowed to have their kids come to the schools and practise these things.

We need to demystify who elders are. They are human beings like everyone else. Their human struggle and confusion are no different from those of the rest of the community. The difference is that they also hold extremely special positions because of their experiences, knowledge and sacred gifts.

And some of these people have lived 60, 75 years or more! And all that time they've lived through that oppression of the larger society. And they've lived through harder times like the depressions and when Native people had to ask for passes to leave reserves. There was no such thing as welfare on the reserves at that time. They still had to live through those times and they survived and are still here today. And they still had problems despite all the gifts from the Creator. They still get weak... So my elders, our Elders, the old people who have all these gifts and knowledge, I still respect them. I don't condemn them for every once in a while getting drunk or whatever. I still feel proud of them, I haven't lost any respect for them in that regard.

The elders are history in the flesh — breathing and living. One needs only to listen to them to begin to appreciate who they are and what they have lived through. Orally, hundreds and hundreds of years of history are passed on from generation to generation through stories, songs, dances, ceremonies and other forms of expression.

The elders are community leaders and are selected out of an earned respect. The electoral system impeded and assaulted this method of choosing community leaders.

From generation to generation the Inuvialuit have always had leaders. They never had such a thing as elections but they would pick the most respected person in the community, wherever it was. They usually picked a person who was a good hunter, a good supplier to his family, and respected by the community where he was always doing things for people. He would be considered a leader. But they always had elders to advise them. And this is something that we had, we never had a riding system, they are things that are passed on from generation to generation. Not all of them but some of them even come out in the songs and dances. [Facilitator: Are these the people who are elected or is it different now?] Oh, it's different now... years ago you didn't look for [the same things] you looked for people who had experience on the land. Today you are looking for people who can deal with government and other organizations. Or you're looking more for education than you are of traditional knowledge.

As leaders, elders also gave political, spiritual and/or traditional advice. They were also

counsellors in areas of life and the various rites of passage, for example, with grieving and loss.

I think what really pulls us together sometimes is when people are going through grieving. Not only the Inuvialuit but the community as a whole. A lot of times it is the majority of Inuvialuit and Gwichin that are going through this grieving and we have our elders to help the grieving family. And there are a lot of elders who have lost loved ones, they have gone through grieving themselves so they have experienced it. And us younger generation, some of us may have experienced grieving maybe five or ten years ago but the elders are always there because they have experience. And I think that is what pulls us together as a people and a community.

At times elders are criticized and treated with disrespect, both by some Aboriginal people who are educated and by some non-Aboriginal people, because they do not have a mainstream education. Their life and lived experience and particular training and wisdom about the traditional ways are sometimes not valued by these people. Once again, the roles and responsibilities of the elders have not been recognized but are invalidated by the mainstream. This was evident in the Inuvialuit learning circle when an elder spoke of an instance where he was perceived and treated as unable to make decisions based on not having gone through the education system.

I think it happens a little bit among our own Aboriginal people. I had a young lady working for me one time and she made a decision that turned out not to be the right decision. And when you're working sometimes you get criticism, like the elders sometimes get criticism because they don't have an education. Some people think it means a lot more to make a decision if you are educated. Well I have not been through the education system but this young lady who I had working for me, she went ahead and made a decision that was a wrong decision. And I had to call her into the office and talk to her about it. And she said, "I didn't feel that I should talk to you because I've been through the education system and you haven't." So she figured that because she went through school, she went to university, she was in a better position than I was to make a proper decision. Where from practical experience I would have made the proper decision. So in some ways we still get criticized, not an awful lot but once in a while. Because the feeling is that we're not educated enough to make decisions.

Again, when community people do not recognize the importance of the elders and they do not transmit this information to the youth, the result is often the disrespect and abuse that elders experience all too frequently. This breakdown in the transmission of critical knowledge is central to the identity issue; it is a significant factor in people's ability (individually and as communities) to develop and maintain a sound sense of who they are. The separation of families as a result of residential school is one example of the roots of the breakdown in the transmission of critical knowledge and relationships that elders have with children, youth and adults. The

child welfare system and the justice system have had similar effects. These barriers were created from institutionalized racist policies and they separated the people from their elders and, accordingly, from the wealth of cultural information the elders had to offer. Finally, the role and contribution of elders need not only to be honoured in a traditional sense, but also in a way that enables them to live in this society through financial support and living situations that enhance their accessibility and livelihood in the urban setting.

Elders play a central role in relation to strengthening culture and identity for Aboriginal people. What became apparent throughout the ten learning circles is the degree to which participants felt elders are fundamental to their conception of and access to Aboriginal culture. Their place is essential for passing on history, language, traditional medicines and knowledge and spiritual guidance; they are also leaders and counsellors of the community as well as political and economical advisers. They can also be sources of strength, courage, truth and humanity. The absence of this enormous resource was evident from the testimonies in the learning circles. The participants resoundingly called for the return of their elders to a position of prominence in the community as well as the return of all that was taken when they were displaced.

Women

Urban Aboriginal women deal with many issues that are similar to other segments of the Aboriginal population. The issues that were distinct for them, however, included sexism, gender role identity, patriarchy, forced urban migration and community alienation. These urban issues are closely related to what is taking place in their reserve or home communities.

Aboriginal women's urban existence is, in large part, a direct result of patriarchal policies that have discriminated against them and fostered the fragmentation and dissension in communities between men and women and also among the women themselves. Hence, many of these issues have contributed to the watering down and, in some cases, the destruction of what were once strong nations. In the learning circles, discussions about urban issues were often directly related to rural issues — they are not exclusive and this analysis will refer to both.

The issue of gender identity and the importance of having an understanding of one's role as an Aboriginal woman was identified by one of the participants in the Halifax women's circle. These are her words:

For me it was learning to identify that I was a woman and where you fit in as a sister, as a daughter, I can't say mother yet because I have no children. But just where you fit in and your place, knowing what your expectations are. I spent a lot of time talking to my father...and understanding...going back and looking at why he treated me like this and how we can build a relationship. Because for the longest time we didn't have a relationship. So, overcoming the issues and making myself aware of what is expected from me in my family and knowing my role a bit more. When I started dealing with my issues I didn't feel like I fit into the family. I didn't feel like I fit into the reserve. I didn't feel like I fit into the Catholic religion. When I started dealing with my issues my father told me to be proud of who I was...to study my ancestors. I started looking at how to even be a sister to my sister. How to be a daughter to my mother. And knowing our roles and responsibilities, how do I talk to my mother? How do I talk to my grandmother? What do I expect from her? What do I expect from my brothers? How do I treat my brothers? And what kind of woman would I be for becoming a parent? I envisage or see myself in a certain way and I have to deal with those issues before I can even become a mother. Or feel worthy of becoming a mother. Or how to be close to another woman. And how to share. And how to talk to one another. And how not to disrespect each other. Friendship. Relearning all those things. I say relearn because when you are abused everything gets all fucked up. Sorry to be so blunt but everything gets totally out of whack that you don't know how to be happy with yourself or where you fit in anywhere.

Women face challenges to learn again how to be women, to respect themselves and each other. Their sense of role identity is, for many, confused and has to be relearned. Like this woman from Halifax, it is necessary for many others to relearn what it is to be a sister, a mother, a daughter, a granddaughter or an auntie. For many of the women who spoke healing is not only about relearning to create healthy families but also about understanding and coming to terms with their disempowerment. Women's healing circles and gatherings in the urban centres have become vital events that instigate the tasks of unlearning and relearning that urban women are struggling with.

Some urban women find the conditions in their rural/reserve communities too difficult to live in, but at the same time they are trying to maintain connections to their elders, culture and spiritual teachings. This is done by returning on a regular basis to be with the significant people and attend important events that prove to strengthen their identity as Aboriginal women. Additionally, for these women it is particularly important to have access to mentors, such as the grandmothers or clan mothers. But access to elders is limited. Therefore, receiving traditional guidance and grounding is difficult in urban centres. Aboriginal organizations and centres have played a significant role in helping women connect to other women, elders and whatever

resources are available.

Forced urban migration is another important issue that the women spoke about. In essence many women have been forced to move away from reserve communities as they lost their status through section 12 1(b) of the *Indian Act*, which effectively separated women from each other, from their families, their community and their culture. Further, many reserve communities show the symptoms of long-term marginalization and denigration of the people who live there — family violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse, suicide, unemployment, inadequate housing and abusive leadership. In these conditions, women often feel powerless and isolated and their only alternative is migration to the city. In urban centres, women are better able to escape and hide, and they may feel safer. But even in the city these women are constrained as they regularly experience poverty, racism and sexual discrimination. The reality for women who are forced to migrate is that they must choose between the lesser of two evils. This was expressed by a woman in the Halifax women's learning circle, whose choice was between living in a small rural community where she was being sexually abused and silenced by her family or leaving the community and living on the streets of the city, which were violent but where she felt safer. This is the nature of 'choice' for many Aboriginal women. Resources and support are much needed to help women turn these negative experiences and choices into constructive and positive ones.

Much discussion revolved around the impact of the church on Aboriginal women's lives. The tensions that arise in families are attributable, in large part, to fractured belief systems; specifically, there is a clash between the teachings of the Christian churches and the traditional teachings of the various Aboriginal nations. The church is a major socialization institution that promotes specific messages about morality, power, God, family and other core areas of life — it is also governed by patriarchal assumptions. Within this context Aboriginal woman's reality and experiences were omitted. As a result of missionary teachings some women spoke of how they internalized feelings of shame, inferiority and self-blame around their experiences of sexual abuse — as if somehow they deserved the abuse they were victimized by. For example, as a result of Christian teachings, some women were left with the understanding that the abuse they suffered was part of their life's path — it was predetermined by God so there was nothing they could do about it. These teachings took away the women's sense of pride, power and control over their own lives. Countless acts of sexual abuse were perpetrated against Aboriginal women

around the country, and the ramifications are only beginning to surface as people come forward with their testimony.

Many women also spoke about their experiences of imposed patriarchy resulting in sexism and male domination. They reported that power holders on their reserves were maintaining social and political structures of male domination and control, often under the guise of a traditional value system. In this scenario, women are not really respected and have no real power or control over the issues that directly affect them. More specifically, women stated that in their reserve communities there exists tension between uneducated men who are in leadership positions and women who have worked to acquire the education and training necessary for administrative and leadership positions. It is many women's experience that there is no place for them, outside of housework and childrearing, in their communities. The women felt that there are no real incentives to return to the reserve community, only barriers and condemnation, while in the urban centre they have a better chance to use their skills for more favourable employment opportunities.

In the end urban Aboriginal women operate without a land base. Their land base may exist technically, on paper, but in reality there is none. Section 12 1(b) of the *Indian Act* ensured that women would not be able to maintain equal political power with their male counterparts. This section also ensured that their children and grandchildren would be in jeopardy of losing their Indian Status. Bill C-31 reinstated lost status and rights as a result of section 12 1(b); however urban women continue to be marginalized in terms of lack of access to a land base, housing and on reserve-rights. One woman in the Halifax elders circle shared this example of the effects of the legislation on her life:

One of the things that has pained me on my cultural identity is the fact that...my mother has three or four brothers and three or four sisters. And three of the women, including my mother, married white men. All of the men married white women. The problem for me has been because the women married white men, they lost their status. The men in the family married white women, they have never lost their status. Nor have their children nor their children's children and so on. And it has pained me a great deal...the discrimination that I feel against the women. And that has been part of my cultural identity and yet it has been robbed of me. It has been given back but I only feel it has been partly given back...with all these clauses in it...I really feel it is unfair. My first cousins are no more Indian than I am and yet I am discriminated against. It really bothers me.... I find that has been a real sore for me.

Those women who may want to return to their community cannot because there are no

resources to accommodate them, and in the city they are living in poverty and isolation. Further, there is a political and social backlash in the form of feelings of exclusion and resentment that linger in reserve communities from many years of government-legislated ostracism. These feelings further complicate an already difficult situation. And the resentment is, in part, understandable when one considers that adequate resources simply were not supplied to ensure that the new law would not create further dissension and struggle for already scarce resources within the bands and tribal councils.

On a more positive note, what Bill C-31 did do for some people was validate their Aboriginal identity. Almost universally, the people said that even though it is only a white government's card, it is something concrete, something tangible that gives them a feeling of belonging and credibility. One Halifax elder stated, "I felt all of a sudden like a tree that the roots went right down and touched the water...like I had roots, where before I was like a water lily just floating around."

In general, there has been consistent devaluation of Aboriginal women politically, socially, economically and spiritually by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sectors. Politically, resulting from the policies of the *Indian Act* and Bill C-31, urban Aboriginal women do not feel recognized or valued by bands, chiefs and councils or their communities. Socially, urban women are isolated from their extended families, communities and each other. As Aboriginal women they are given less recognition than white women, especially when white women living on the reserve have acquired Indian status. This is very demoralizing. One man in the Winnipeg inmates circle validated this experience by stating the following: "A lot of guys in the city, they even hate their own sisters, because they're First Nations. They see their sisters as promiscuous women, they have an image of them as being too promiscuous for them so they go after Caucasian women because their sisters are not good enough for them. And I'm sorry to say that, and I used to think like that too." Many urban Aboriginal women are living in poverty while they are the primary caregivers of their children. Single parenting, often under stressful circumstances, is not uncommon. Housing is often unsuitable, appropriate child care is minimal in culturally relevant settings, and high levels of unemployment are part of daily reality for many urban women. With respect to their cultural identity, knowledge of spiritual practices, healing medicines, midwifery (which has been essentially taken over by white doctors), and many women's teachings are also minimally accessible. The policies of assimilation have strategically

targeted the centre of Aboriginal families and communities — the women. This has not only ensured the loss of critical information, roles and responsibilities, but it has also created a profound dissension between rural and urban communities.

Family

See the family is the foundation of who we are and if we don't have a family we're nobody. We don't have a sense of belonging. But when we have that foundation our grandparents, great-grandparents, brothers and sisters, extended family, we're a total human being.

As this quotation from the Saskatchewan treaty circle expresses, family was among the elements that people in the learning circles identified most consistently as being at the core of their cultural identity. Generally, the participants' Aboriginal identity was strengthened because of the support of family members; even if there was much familial conflict, shame or denial about Aboriginal heritage, there was usually at least one person from the extended family who was an important resource or access point. One of the elders in the Saskatchewan circle spoke at length about the vital place of family relationships and the extended family concept in the Saulteaux culture:

In our own language, calling my dad's brothers was like calling my own father, that's how I addressed them. And my mother's sisters were like my second mothers. That's like the belonging was there so close that we could walk into any of my mother's sisters [homes] like they were second mothers to us. It was that, it was respect and you felt secure. You had that extended family that if our mother is gone, well we had another mother here and there's another one up here. And they took us that way, they even called us their daughter and us too — [says Saulteaux expression for aunt which sounds like the word for mother] — that's like my second mother. Same thing with uncles, on my dad's side his brothers were like my fathers. And that's how they addressed us: "My daughter. My daughter." It was not by name. Now, today that's lost. Relationship is lost. That's why a lot of young people are lost — they don't know who they are related to. And that was, when you talk about prophecies, our people said that: Some day, you will be so mixed up in the white world, mixed up with alcohol, mixed up with everything, that you are not going to know who you are related to. That's going to be lost. Even as you hold your own child in your arms, some day that child will not even understand you as a mother. It won't have your tongue [language]. You'll lose to somebody else. Lose to somebody else! And yet that's your child! That's loss of identity or loss of a language. I say that the relationship of people was so close long ago, everyone knew in each home who that was — your uncle, your aunt, your grandfather — everybody was grandfather, grandmother. That's the way we addressed each other, not by name. Now today that's lost!

Many speakers in the various circles across the country made the point that before the

system of state welfare, which created for many Aboriginal communities dependence on money and services provided by government, the extended family was where people sought support. The extended family is still important for the people in the learning circles, it is still a place of fundamental support that is central to the cultural identity of many people, but it has been deeply wounded by colonialism.

When the residential schools sought to wipe out Aboriginal languages, spirituality, ritual and ceremony, they focused their efforts on the family. Removing the children in order to interrupt their development and socialization was a potent intervention by the church and government. So effective was this immense scheme that the fundamental relationships in the lives of many of the students were completely wiped out or irretrievably altered, leaving both parent and child lost in process of profound grieving. Today, the children and grandchildren of the survivors of residential schools are extensively over-represented in the adoption, foster care and justice systems. Although not all people who went through foster care or adoption had terrible experiences, in most cases their Aboriginal identity suffered because the majority of them were placed in non-Aboriginal homes where their identity was either overtly humiliated, consciously denied or simply overlooked through ignorance. Only one woman, from the Saskatoon circle, told about how her adoptive parents always acknowledged her Aboriginal identity, always told her to be proud, and admitted their own ignorance and inability to tell her more about it, though they supported her efforts to learn. At the other end of the spectrum were stories about multiple foster homes, shaming of anything Aboriginal and all forms of abuse. The men in the inmates circle were testimony to this pattern as most were the children of residential school students and were graduates of the child welfare system. These men expressed the anger and rage of their victimization with great frankness.

The *Indian Act* also legislated the destruction of Aboriginal families and communities. It divided families by ruling that women would lose their status if they married non-Aboriginal men. Until Bill C-31, many Aboriginal women were forced out of their communities, separated from their families, and all their rights as an Aboriginal person were taken away. These dynamics underscore the massive forced urbanization of countless Aboriginal women in Canada. In the women's circle and in many other circles there was much focus on the way the *Indian Act* defined Aboriginal identity in a way that was foreign to the Aboriginal people themselves, but this facet of colonialism has been effectively internalized and now Aboriginal people themselves

are in conflict over who belongs in their communities based on mainstream legislation and not on Aboriginal heritage. In contrast, there are some positive changes taking place where communities are honouring the ancestry of their nation over federal regulations. For example, a man in Victoria told the group that his mother died soon after she regained her status, so she also received an allotment of reserve land; after her death, though he chose not to apply for status, his relationship to her and the nation was honoured, and he inherited her land on the reserve. Though he has lived in the urban centre for many years, he is now building a house in his reserve community. This man was the only person who spoke of these types of arrangements, though many people often referred to the importance of Aboriginal people practising more sovereignty guided by the traditions of their nations.

Bill C-31 had positive potential to help bring people back to their rightful communities and to validate their identity. Though conceived with just intentions the change in policy has fuelled further division because it was not backed up with sufficient resources (such as land and money, given that many people would be trying to return to communities where resources were already scarce) and it stopped well short of supporting Aboriginal people to define their own membership.

One of the important messages that the men in the Winnipeg inmates circle shared was how many viewed their time in the prison as a vision quest: a time for rebuilding or strengthening their Aboriginal identity, relearning their vision, and educating themselves about the impact of colonialism on their people. Many individuals across the country were in the same process, beginning with the relationships in their families. Like the woman in the Halifax women's circle, many people are relearning what it is to be a sister, a brother, a daughter, a mother, a husband, a wife, an uncle, a grandmother — how to establish and maintain relationships with the people who are supposed to be closest to you. In essence the rebuilding of Aboriginal nations is beginning with individuals and families.

I had to go back to losing touch with my family but I was able to deal with that by talking it out with my mother. And right now, though we have that closeness again, mother and daughter, we are still working on it. I still feel a sense of loss like I'm on the road to recovery. And she still feels the same way too so we have a lot of work to do. Because after 15 years I finally got to be with my mother. The woman in the Saskatoon treaty circle who shared this observation said she once had a very large family, but all that was left was her relationship with her mother and one of her brothers. She felt very confused yet hopeful that at least she is rebuilding something with her mother.

The adults spoke often about how the most important thing in their lives is to be a good parent, and the role of teacher to their children is something fundamental to their identity. One of the men in the Victoria artists circle mourned the loss of traditional parenting techniques and he advocated the development of parenting programs to overcome the eradication of this knowledge by the residential school system. He felt that although it was one of the saddest losses there was also much hope in the fact that all people possess some knowledge about traditional parenting and if a process was undertaken to bring that information together there would be a chance to revive some of the important lessons about parenting from the past.

Adults also felt very protective of the younger generation, seeing it as perhaps the most important resource for the reconstruction of Aboriginal cultures.

We need to be passing down our culture, our tradition, our customs, our spiritual guidance. Our medicine people need to be helping people, taking in young people under their wing and guiding them and showing them all the things that they need to know. Otherwise it is going to be something that we will read about in the history books. The talent, the gifts, the special offerings that each and every one of us has must be shared with the younger people. If we need workshops, if we need to take them individually into our homes, conferences, however it is that we need to target our children. This is the only way that we are going to be able to preserve it.

These words from one of the women in the Halifax elders circle articulate the message that many people stated throughout the ten learning circles: that Aboriginal youth are a vital resource and it is crucial that adults and elders nurture and support their learning process. For the most part, we heard the testimony of adults who spoke of the profound importance of reaching out to youth to stop the disintegration of tradition through institutionalized cultural genocide. Repeatedly, the message from young people was that they felt lost and often they also felt hurt and angry. The youth in the Inuvialuit circle clearly expressed that they wanted to learn more about their Aboriginal identity but it was as if the adults in their lives weren't able to respond or were not taking them seriously. This sense of abandonment was frustrating for them. More often they understood the toll that colonialism has had on their families and communities, and this left most feeling angry, while others expressed thinly veiled rage.

It is apparent that many young people are looking for a welcoming family or community of people who will answer questions about their life for them. One young man in the Victoria artist's circle stated that he was within reach of this important resource but that he was hesitant and wanted to be sure he initiated choices about how he would express his Aboriginal identity.

His hesitancy is understandable in light of the fact that he, like many young people, knows that Aboriginal people have been affected by colonialism but they are not certain of the precise details of how these historical events affect their lives today. For example, the residential school system was an overt and tangible colonial act. One or two generations later, these young people are dealing with the subsequent internalized colonialism which is ominous and intangible. It's like a dark, threatening presence that is undefinable but causes immense confusion and pain for so many people. In the Inuvialuit youth circle their desire to know more was expressed in repeated suggestions promoting culturally appropriate curriculum development in their schools. In short, young people want to understand why their lives are the way they are, and they aren't getting answers that satisfy their need to know. At the same time many adults are beginning to realize the important role they have to play as advocates and teachers for their youth given the negative effects of residential schools, the child welfare system and other mainstream institutions on their lives.

Community

Well, learning how to survive in the urban wilderness has put me in the situation many times that I had to compromise the morals and the values that I was brought up with, with my grandparents — the teachings and what not. It took away some of my self-respect and dignity, some of the things that I'm learning, when I'm here in the institution, to get back somehow, little by little. But I'm managing to relate more on a human level with regard to the natural order and the earth. I realize my place there. That's where my heart and where my teachings come from.

This man in the Winnipeg inmates circle, like other people around the country, expressed the difficulties he has had surviving in the urban community. Other inmates also talked about the shock they experienced when confronted by the drastic differences in core values that governed people's lives and in the survival skills needed for the urban as compared to the rural environment. Here is a passage from one of the men speaking about this

Change of lifestyle, right from Aboriginal community right into the mainstream. It was almost like a culture shock! Because you have to get used to avenues, streets, which direction avenues went, which direction streets went. The lifestyle of living in the city...everything surrounds money, things like that, personal needs, eh? So that was a change of lifestyle all together: going from Native, hunting and trapping, to, all of a sudden, living in the city — not knowing anybody! It's a whole different lifestyle all on its own. So that was a negative thing for me. And work, in order to survive you had to work. Either that or else steal.

Further, urban migrants were also confronted with racism and many lacked education and

employment skills that would help them gain access to resources in the city. To overcome these barriers, some of the men (though not all) took part in illegal activity in order to survive and eventually got into trouble with the law. This is not to minimize the individual choices made by these men that eventually brought them to prison, but it is also important to examine some of the stresses that inform the actions of certain members of the circle.

In other groups people identified the urban community as a place where they came to get employment, education or housing but also as a place that was often hostile to, or completely neglected, their Aboriginal identity. A woman in the Saskatoon circle articulated the issue in this way:

I know who I am. I know what my culture is. But right now I am an angry prisoner. I am angry because I am trapped in a white man's world which is made of concrete and blacktop and white man rules. My culture is to be able to go out and hunt on the land that I grew up on. But I can't do that anywhere here! [laughs] You're not going to find a deer running around in the middle of the city. Another part of my culture is being able to make a smokehouse in my backyard and smoking the meat and enjoying it. And if I did that here in the city I'm pretty sure a fire truck would come along and blow away the whole thing. Another thing...I belong to a drum group and I'm pretty sure if I phoned up the drum group and said, "Come on down, we'll build a bonfire in my backyard and we'll practise our pow wow songs." The cops would be knocking on my front door saying I'm disturbing the peace.

The people of the learning circles usually identified their rural Aboriginal community as the place that was home to their heart. It was often a place that validated their Aboriginal identity instead of diminishing it. In their home community, usually the rural community of their extended family, people had access to cultural information that was not available in the city; there were elders, people who spoke the languages, people who knew the songs and dances, people who knew stories, healers, political leaders and teachers that could help people live in the urban centre in a way that still honoured their identity. In the Quebec circle the point was made that the fundamental aspect of identity is the individual choice to associate with and take part in the community of Aboriginal people. A young man in the Victoria artists circle was starting to realize the importance of this community in his life:

Having the connections in the city and on the reserve is a real blessing 'cause I never thought I'd have the chance to learn my language, dances, songs, traditions — it wasn't even in my thoughts when I was growing up. When I was young my whole life was surrounded by alcohol and now my whole life is around recovery. I look at my people and I wonder how can I benefit from them, I want to be a part of the community — the only way is if I participate. They are slowly coming, not

quick enough, but neither am I, I've decided to procrastinate all the way. I want to take it one step at a time, to make sure each is solid. I'm slowly getting to know the family. The dances are powerful, they make me feel really good, and that's hard to accept. One realization was that the people in the community really do like me, I'm not such an outsider because I live in an urban area. When that happens I just want to take another step towards my culture.

This passage is a good example of how one young person is using the community as a resource to investigate and support his Aboriginal identity; many other participants had a similar community in their lives. One of the women in the Halifax elders circle had an apartment in the urban centre but worked almost entirely in Aboriginal communities in the education system. In her opinion,

I guess there is something really missing when you don't have connections on the reserve, which I have. I still have some strong connections on the reserve, I'm back and forth and I work in the Indian communities — I just live in the city. I suppose you could say that it's just a place for me to hang my hat a couple of days a week and the rest of the time I'm on the reserves in my work.

Not all urban Aboriginal people have the choice of making a living in a way that supports their identity. One of the elders in the Saskatoon circle worked as a teacher for many years but finally had to leave his profession because it could not honour his Aboriginal identity. In Inuvik, people faced a similar issue; there people talked about how their jobs in the city are helpful for surviving but they cannot go out on the land during hunting seasons because the mainstream organizations do not operate in recognition of such natural cycles.

And not all people have a rural Aboriginal community they feel accepted in or want to be a significant part of. Some of the women in the Halifax circle were angry at their reserves because they felt devalued, abused or disempowered by people and organizations in the community. "It's like living in a fish bowl." Though they couldn't live there full-time they felt it was important to maintain relationships in their rural communities by going to significant ceremonies and gatherings; one of the women summed up the dynamic by saying,

Leaving the oppressive state of the reserve, at times, and moving to the city really helped me! I'm not living in that oppressive state. I can go home, I can visit, I can leave, I can live my life here. I'm not forced to live in that depressive state anymore. If I want to choose to go back it's up to me. But I'm not forced to move back. Here in the city I'm still an Indian. I am who I am...I'm a better person now than before. The city is really [liberating]. You are very limited on the reserve.... You are what people want you to be. You are what people accept you to be...you're within bounds. Living in the city, we all know what it is like to leave your community. You are still a part of your community but you are not oppressed by your community.

Finally, there is a group of people who feel the process of honouring their Aboriginal identity in the urban centre is not a clear one and the isolation, the confusion and the tension that result from trying to come to terms with the two worlds are so painful and overwhelming that it steers them on a path of self-destruction.

Urban Aboriginal organizations were described as an oasis in the city for all participants in the circles. For example, the friendship centres offer a range of vital services to Aboriginal people and they are, in many cities, the hub of the urban Aboriginal community; more important, learning circle participants spoke often of how their identity was also validated in the centres by simply being with other Aboriginal people who were struggling with many of the same issues. Culturally relevant festivals and gatherings gave participants the same feeling of validation. In fact any organization, experience or event that could authentically recognize and support their Aboriginal identity was positive, be it in the context of progressive mainstream education institutions or traditional Aboriginal organizations.

Development and Self-Determination

Organizing and forming coalitions has significantly helped alleviate feelings of pain, loss, grief, anger, despair and isolation experienced by many Aboriginal people. Gatherings and meetings of a political, social and spiritual nature bring people together and give individuals opportunities to see that they are not alone. Generally, the organization and development of these gatherings has centred around acts of defiance, mutual identification and healing. Mutual interest groups are essential, particularly to people living in urban centres who may not be in touch with other Aboriginal people on a daily basis — as compared to smaller rural reserve communities for example. These organizations and activities have validated and made visible Aboriginal people who would otherwise be a non-issue and an unworthy concern in Canada. Many participants in this study felt that events such as Oka and Meech Lake strengthened their sense of pride and group identity. These high-profile events have also fostered the development of Aboriginal coalitions, conferences, gatherings, meetings and political organizations that have brought people together to share and learn from one another. Further, in meeting with other Aboriginal people, individuals begin to connect their personal problems with broader historical events and political agendas — which is, for many people, instrumental in their healing process. For example, one person in the Victoria artists circle spoke of the significance of a three-day conference of the

Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs that he attended as a teenager:

I went to a Union of British Columbia Native Chiefs meeting at 16 years old. I really had no idea there were so many tribes all over B.C. I went through school and learned about some of the groups but they were names not people. The conference opened my eyes to people because in the evenings the youth groups would sit around and I would hear the Nisgaa youth talk about their land claims battle and things of that nature. Our people were way behind that, we were passively accepting what DIA gave to us. It opened my mind that we can do things to make our lives better. I couldn't perceive a different way of being before the meetings. I experienced a total transformation in the three days — I began a young naive boy and left with many new ideas and an understanding of the diversity of cultures. The experience opened my mind to realize that I need to know these people more; knowing my own culture is not enough, all over the island there were all different people. Politically, it opened my mind that we need to fight peacefully, through the system. That agency and time was important to me because they did fight to ensure change would begin and we have progressed. Even since 1960 there has been immense change. My parents were treated like a non-human when they came to the city; today when you walk into a store...well the floor walkers follow you because they think you're a thief, but at least you're getting some attention! [whole group erupts into laughter] Before you could be kicked out. The friendship centres are also very important agencies because they bring together a lot of the people and bring together a lot of the issues we need to address.

Participants in this study suggested that instituting cultural traditions and practices in existing mainstream settings was one way of recognizing the distinctness of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal peoples no longer are willing to be excluded. Institutionalized racism is evident in organizations that operate under a narrow system of deeply entrenched values and beliefs. An Inuvialuit woman, referring to recent changes in the northern legislature to include more Aboriginal people, stated that

Even though the makeup [of the government] has a majority of Aboriginal people...you still have to consider that the structures that are underneath them are very much non-Aboriginal... The structures that were there before they came on are still there... A lot of the directives and the policy setting was done through the use of these people. So it's again very much an institutional issue where you have to change the whole system and not just kind of the cosmetics of it — what the make-up is.

The men in the Winnipeg inmates circle were able to articulate the significance of instituting culturally appropriate programs in the prison. Because of the initiatives of the Native Brotherhood Organization, the prison has become a place where many of the men have begun to learn and feel good about their culture and identity. Before the formal agenda of the learning circle could begin the men (like participants in other regions) had reservations about speaking to

the federal government considering how many reports bring about little real change in their lives; on this issue and the importance of culturally relevant programs one man stated,

And a lot of those that are in jail now, this is the first time they have ever sat in a circle and shared a pipe, or gone to a sweat. This is where they're starting to learn different aspects of their culture — having an Anishnabe name, your own spiritual name. This is where they're learning about their culture. I think for the longest time our people were embarrassed or ashamed of being Anishnabe or being Native people in Canada because there was such a negative connotation on Native people: they were all drunks, thieves and welfare recipients and this and that.... So it's important for us to talk about these things and the things that concern us. Otherwise they [the Royal Commission research team as representatives of the mainstream government] don't know us, they don't understand about our culture because it is so foreign to them. They can't understand anything about the spirituality, these people have lost touch with their spirits and that's why our society is the way it is now. It's important for them to understand what we as Native people have gone through — at their hands.

Institutionalizing authentic cultural programs in mainstream settings has great potential for strengthening identity; the specific make-up of such programs must be determined by the Aboriginal people involved, with the help of their elders and other resource people. Elders and traditional people ought to be treated with the same respect given, for example, to a parish priest entering these settings to work with Aboriginal people. Their ceremonies and ceremonial tools must be treated with honour and respect as well. Additionally, the staff of such organizations need to be educated about these matters in order to unlearn their racism and to respect the diversity of Aboriginal peoples. Still, it is a stressful situation when Aboriginal people are hired to bring about change within mainstream institutions based on diametrically opposed ideologies. Working with non-Aboriginal people and institutions that express a desire for positive change yet have done nothing to educate themselves about the real issues that concern Aboriginal people is extremely draining. When there is only one Aboriginal person working in a mainstream organization it is often the case that he or she is treated as the 'Indian voice' — the representative or cultural consultant for all Aboriginal nations. At the same time when Aboriginal issues do arise and the one or two token people are asked to speak, their words are often trivialized.

On the other hand, participants in the learning circles felt that Aboriginal organizations and leaders also need to remember who they are working for and where their roots lie when representing their people. Most of the work focused specifically on Aboriginal people now taking place is developmental in nature: the takeover of government services by Aboriginal organizations, education, self-government, social welfare and health. There are no prototypes,

there are only mainstream models. And the challenge is to avoid simply emulating old organizational models, which have been demonstrated to be ineffective, in order to create authentic Aboriginal services. A man from the Saskatoon treaty circle articulated these tensions in the following statement:

I find we are too westernized. We're trying to compete in a set of rules that are not made by us, nor are they part of us, nor do we understand them. Speaking from personal experience, being involved in the community, I find as a Native person trying to represent a community, I found it hard trying to deal with western beliefs and thoughts, at the same time trying to incorporate the needs and aspirations of the Native community.

Internal issues of accountability in Aboriginal governments and organizations need to be dealt with. People need to feel they have a voice. Women particularly have been marginalized and want their voice heard. One woman in the Saskatoon treaty circle made the point that, in contrast to the relative powerlessness of Aboriginal women today, traditionally her grandmother made all the major family decisions and that was her role. Other participants stated that they have no voting power and as a result do not feel represented by many Aboriginal organizations — local, regional or national. Speakers in the learning circles expressed much frustration and concern at not being represented by their leaders. For example, national Aboriginal leaders are chosen by a relatively small group of the political elite, but the urban people who participated in our study did not feel they could take part in the electoral process. A procedure must be established that will include urban people in establishing national Aboriginal leaders. Further, participants wanted the leadership to be connected to traditions and culture and not to work in a vacuum outside them; this was the emphasis of an Inuvialuit woman who stated:

To be a leader, sure you can have the education, but to know your people's needs you have to have the traditions — traditional lives — as the background of the people.... I don't like the way some of the organizations are run and yet we don't have a voice in there! Because we can't relate to the people who are sitting on the leadership.

You can't advocate for your people if you aren't part of the culture — there has to be a balance of the traditional and the modern.

To be effective, organizations must also ensure that expressions of Aboriginal culture and identity are normal and acceptable, rather than deviant and unacceptable. A Winnipeg inmate stated: "These people made our culture a crime! To practise our ceremonies it was a crime...". Aboriginal reality must be recognized, and this can take place when only representation is visible, whether that be in the form of a building structure, nation flags, political voice, in media,

education or anything else that makes our presence and life valid and real.

Educational institutions must begin to make education relevant to lifestyle. For example, the Gwichin and Inuvialuit want to take their kids out on the land and teach them. How can this occur if mainstream values dominate and leave no room for others to exercise their rights. This is racism and it must be confronted and dealt with. Education must be driven by the needs of the community and what they feel is important if children are to become responsible and contributing members of their society. Curriculum that is externally developed and controlled is often irrelevant and, historically, it has not reinforced a sense of well-being and identity in Aboriginal people. The messages in the curriculum with respect to Aboriginal people have been, in large part, very derogatory and negative and the structure has rarely reflected Aboriginal culture. These parameters must be determined by local Aboriginal people in order to recognize regional distinctions. The following statement is from an Inuvialuit elder who spoke about the struggle to achieve relevant education in the community of Inuvik:

The other thing is that in the other smaller communities where there is a majority Gwichin or a majority Inuvialuit they have the power to change the school year. They leave school in May and come back in August. Here, in the 1960s, we were trying to change the school year so that our kids could go out on the land with us. But the argument we got back from the government was no we couldn't do that because there was almost as many white children in the school as there was Aboriginal children. So therefore it would disrupt their school year if we got our way. So in that way we could never change the school year here.

[Later]...I think the schools are getting programs where people can take kids out on the land. I know I'm on a committee now to see what we can do about taking kids out. So, I think it's taken many many years but I think we are overcoming some of these situations.

Many people affirmed the right of Aboriginal people to self-determine who they are and how they should live. They asserted their right to live off the land and exercise their treaty rights under traditional Aboriginal laws. They also spoke of their right to live as Aboriginal people, as they have been taught to live by their grandparents and parents. In short, Aboriginal peoples' right to govern their own lives and affairs and to control their own finances was echoed across all circles and it was also articulated specifically by one of the elders in the Saskatoon treaty circle who saw the *Indian Act* as the main legislative impediment to progress of this nature:

The *Indian Act* is the thing that took away a lot of the rights of Indian people — to be able to control their own lives. That's what is controlling the people today, the *Indian Act*. And this is what we were trying to break away from with our constitutional rights but now it's going to be here with us for many many years

because we didn't get what we wanted [referring to Charlottetown constitutional negotiations]. Without the *Indian Act* we can have self-government. With the *Indian Act* we will never have self-government, we will always be governed by the white man.... They refuse to see that because if we govern ourselves who's going to lose jobs and who's going to be working? The Indian people. For instance, if we got rid of the *Indian Act* there would be no more Indian affairs, it would be taken over by our people.... Where are we going to get the money to govern ourselves?... What's running your programs right now? Indian affairs? Our money. Indian affairs is given money by the federal government for Indian people, each year in every province — to run us!... That is our money.... All the big money is controlled by Indian affairs. That's the same money we could be using to control our own lives. That money could be going into reserves.

People want to exercise control and power over their lives in a meaningful way, not simply to fill a quota or represent the 'Indian face'. They need to be able to exercise power at decision-making levels and not simply on advisory bodies. Aboriginal people have also found that even when they are consulted, policy makers do not use their input in a substantial or authentic way. Aboriginal people want a significant and genuine voice at the policy and planning levels in all stages.

Many participants in the learning circles also affirmed their right to heal and provide treatment to Aboriginal people that is consistent with their culture and to determine how such ideals will be implemented in the form of practical solutions. For example, countless Aboriginal people are trying to heal from the symptoms of colonialism and racism — alcoholism, addictions, family violence, suicide, depression, mental illness and others. They need to deal with those symptoms and heal in their own way and in their own time. Treatments that are time-limited are ridiculous when someone has carried symptoms for years. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike need to take part in the healing process of decolonizing our minds, hearts and spirits.

There needs to be clarification around how urban people can exercise their treaty rights. From the testimonies of the learning circle participants, it is apparent that urban people are operating with a shortage of accurate information, as are non-Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal organizations ought to be advocating for these treaty rights and ensuring information is shared and delivered to the people. There is also the issue of exercising self-government in urban centres and ensuring that urban people are included and have a voice in these processes. Urban people require more information on establishing a land base, particularly those urban people who belong to bands with no land base. Again, a land base is essential in establishing one's roots and identity. For Aboriginal people to become self-governing, especially in urban centres,

information and resources must be equally distributed so that small groups of political elites do not control the movement. Forums need to take place and people must have an opportunity to gather and dialogue with one another about the issues and about the solutions.

Recommendations

The following recommendations represent an integration of the recommendations made by all the learning circles. Themes that are specific to a region, a nation or a people, for instance, were left in the description of that specific learning circle but not included here. As well there are some recommendations here that were added by the research team at the end of the entire project.

Self-Determination

1a. We, as distinct sovereign nations, assert recognition of our inherent right of self-determination with the required legislative authority to exercise control over our own institutions and resources, for example, lands, education, natural resources, employment, health, housing, economic development, family and child welfare services. All of these institutions would be guided by the dictates of the cultural traditions and practices of each self-determining nation. Further, the inherent right of self-government for Aboriginal peoples must be recognized in the Canadian constitution and guided by the spirit and intent of the treaties, through a harmonious working relationship of all nations, including federal, provincial and local governments.

1b. That the existing treaties between Canada and the First Nations be acknowledged and honoured and Aboriginal peoples duly compensated for the fact that the Canadian government has been unable to fulfil the fiduciary obligations spelled out by the treaties.

1c. That Aboriginal nations be recognized as the rightful authority on issues of membership within their own nations.

1d. That Aboriginal people be guaranteed the right to practise their cultural and spiritual traditions to the fullest capacity regardless of where they are.

1e. Until self-governing mechanisms are in place, that an interim political body representing the concerns of all Aboriginal people be formed to advocate at the provincial and federal levels of government.

Land

2a. That equitable and swift settlements be reached with respect to outstanding land claims issues.

2b. That better and more flexible mechanisms to settle land claims be developed immediately.

2c. That urban land bases be established for Aboriginal communities to exercise greater autonomy within the urban environment.

2d. That a process be instituted whereby urban people can exercise their treaty rights and land rights. And for those people who have no official land base, that a process be instituted to help them gain access to some form of liveable and resourceable land.

Legislation and Human Rights

3a. That, until self-governing institutions are in place, all rights, resources and benefits pertaining to people living on *Indian Act* reserves be granted equally to those living off-reserve; this should apply to all Aboriginal people. Effectively this recommendation would see the end of the distinction between on-reserve and off-reserve rights and privileges.

3b. That the federal and provincial human rights agencies clarify their jurisdictions with respect to Aboriginal people so that human rights abuses with respect to Aboriginal people can be dealt with in a clear and consistent manner. Further, this initiative should include the development of support and encouragement for Aboriginal people to report human rights violations to the appropriate agency; this initiative could begin with a simple handbook that explains the procedure.

3c. That a protective mechanism such as an office or legal agency of Aboriginal peoples be created and developed, by Aboriginal people, to ensure all legislation being passed by Parliament in no way infringes on the rights of Aboriginal people. Additionally, this agency would include a forum to inform Aboriginal people of all laws and decisions (made by government and/or business) that affect, for example, their lands and resources, their livelihood, their rights or their communities.

3d. Urban people who are estranged personally and culturally from their communities are often ignorant of their Aboriginal rights. An agency should be established that works to inform them of

their rights and assists them to navigate the red tape involved in asserting the rights they have.

Education and Cultural Renewal

4a. That qualified Aboriginal elders, educators, writers, historians, artists and academics rewrite our history accurately, integrating information from oral histories, storytelling, memories, dreams, visions, elders' life histories, tribal languages, customs, traditions and culture. This accurate historical information should first be available to Aboriginal children, families, communities and nations. This information should also be recorded in textbooks and reference materials such as audio-visual recordings and written information. Further, the information could then be distributed for use at all levels of the education system, from preschool to post-graduate. To this end governments and media institutions must also use this information to promote an accurate image of Aboriginal people in order to counteract old stereotypes. In the place of stereotypes this history would contain information such as the contributions of Aboriginal people and the historical destruction of their society and territory through colonization.

4b. That Aboriginal schools be created in urban centres for Aboriginal children and youth. These schools would reflect an Aboriginal context and would incorporate authentic culture, language, curriculum, activities, arts, music and spirituality. And that students have the choice of attending an Aboriginal separate school system, without the stigma of deviant, special needs, or drop-out. This ought to be a place to excel in a culturally rich milieu, with components that help students learn about their heritage and learn to leave unhealthy patterns behind.

4c. That multifaceted Aboriginal cultural centres be established in urban settings. These centres would be a place for people to learn, a resource for cultural renewal, and a meeting place for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The location of the centres would be central, accessible and safe for everyone who wishes to use them. Further, Aboriginal elders should be used throughout the development and in the daily activities and programs of the centres where possible. Also language programs that reflect the surrounding regional Aboriginal nations could be offered. As well, traditional circles of spiritual healing, teaching and learning would be promoted and used within the centres. Using the resources of the centres, Aboriginal people would compile, promote, distribute and preserve elders' life histories, storytelling, visions and dreams on audio-visual and written records. A library/archival resource centre that includes local historical events from an Aboriginal perspective would also be part of these cultural and learning

institutions. There could also be instruction in craft techniques for the maintenance and promotion of age-old cultural/traditional skills — open to all ages. Included in the centres would be daycare and meeting rooms to meet the needs of the urban Aboriginal community as well as a gift shop that promotes and sells Aboriginal crafts, books, records, tapes, and art to the general public. Finally, Aboriginal people would be employed throughout the conception, development, design, construction and operation of the centres.

4d. The establishment and implementation of a national Aboriginal resource network system and centre for the collection, housing, distribution and networking of culturally-based information controlled by and for Aboriginal peoples. An archive and resource centre of this sort could use computer technology to link with regional centres or communities all over the country to help them gain access to important cultural information.

4e. That Aboriginal educators design, develop and implement culturally relevant curriculum and programs for use in all education systems.

4f. That Aboriginal people who want to learn their language be given the opportunity to learn and pass it on to future generations. Further, Aboriginal languages should be mandatory at elementary levels and optional in secondary school systems. Lastly, resources should be made available for the continuing development of Aboriginal languages, by elders and resource people, in order to derive new terminology that reflects modern technology and cultural changes.

4g. That more Aboriginal educators be recruited, trained and hired in mainstream education institutions, and that localized training programs be established to prepare and encourage Aboriginal people to pursue professional career paths (such as social workers, counsellors, economic development officers, community developers, lawyers, accountants, engineers, administrators, managers) that will benefit their communities and advance the process of self-determination.

4h. That a restructured traditional parenting program be developed and implemented to address the systematic destruction and disintegration of the traditional family by assimilationist policies such as residential schools and the child welfare system, legislated by federal and provincial governments. This program would also incorporate components that deal with decolonization, internalized colonization and racism and cultural revitalization.

Youth

5a. That Aboriginal youth centres be established with culturally appropriate activities and programs that promote fun and teach cultural values and traditions. Specific areas of learning could include outdoor education and survival, traditional cultural practices, history and art.

5b. That multi-disciplinary education programs be developed that use elders, artists, leaders, ex-inmates, teachers and other significant community resource people as voices of experience to address the concerns and issues of Aboriginal youth. These programs could be portable and used in educational settings such as Aboriginal youth centres, schools and community centres. These programs should include a critical history, validating and making visible our reality and addressing decolonization — externally and internally.

5c. That the human services education of provincial social workers reflect the work they do with Aboriginal people in urban centres. Decolonization, anti-racism, and cultural awareness must be a mandatory part of curricula.

5d. That the removal of children from Aboriginal families be inextricably linked to culturally based services, treatment and quick recovery of the family unit. That existing urban Aboriginal organizations and services be mandated and funded to provide child welfare services.

5e. That urban Aboriginal child welfare services be instituted and sufficiently funded. That legislation be drafted to begin transfer of authority initiatives in urban centres.

5f. That more stringent screening and training for foster and adoptive parents be implemented in child protection legislation, as it is critical to the welfare of Aboriginal children who become absorbed by the non-Aboriginal child welfare system. Too many children in care are sexually, emotionally, racially or culturally abused. And that more Aboriginal foster parents be trained and used by Aboriginal child and youth services.

Elders

6a. The establishment of safe, healthy and secure urban residential environments for elders that promote culturally appropriate activities with adequate resources and facilities to do so, including proper medical support systems.

6b. That Aboriginal elders be recognized for their role as teachers and storehouses of vital information about Aboriginal traditions and how they can be applied to modern circumstances. Elders can help infuse spiritual integrity into the urban community because it is culture and

tradition that feed the spirit, that form aesthetic and creative expression, encourage altruism, and teach respect and connection to the earth and creation, as well as respect for elders, self and life. In essence, the cultural understandings that elders hold must be valued and used at every opportunity to enhance and strengthen identity.

Women

7a. That information on sexism, racism, classism, ageism, homophobia and other socially constructed inequities be topics of learning for society in general, and particularly in relation to social service professionals, reserve populations, impoverished populations, professional educators and the personnel and leadership of Aboriginal organizations, both rural and urban. The experiences of Aboriginal women need to be reflected in this information, as these biases and attitudes create horrendous living conditions for women both on- and off-reserve and must be addressed to produce real change.

7b. That women elders and grandmothers be given resources to form organizations that provide urban women with culturally appropriate medicines, services, counsellors, mentors, spiritual guides and women's teachings. These women must be made accessible to urban women and children, and their contribution must be recognized as legitimate and valuable through the establishment of a gathering and meeting place — for example, a grandmothers lodge for learning and teaching. And that this agency or organization be given financial resources to promote healing and wellness among Aboriginal women.

7c. That Aboriginal midwives be recognized for their expertise and contribution in pregnancy and childbirth. That our natural teachers and helpers be reinstated so that they can reclaim their natural roles and responsibilities among other women.

7d. That healing centres meet the specific needs of urban women. They must incorporate programs that are capable of dealing with a multitude of issues, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, family violence, addictions, prostitution, child abuse and neglect, poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia and alienation from home communities. That is, the staff must be trained and educated in areas of sexism, patriarchal domination, racism, decolonization and forced migration and be able to reframe the symptoms that urban women cope and live with on a daily basis. That these centres incorporate appropriate support services such as child care, after care and follow up.

7e. That an agency or organization develop services to inform and educate women on their rights, both off- and on-reserve. This would include helping them obtain information about their treaty, land, band and tribal rights. Women must have equal opportunity of access to their own entitlements.

7f. That Aboriginal women's political marginalization be recognized and that a process be established to begin to remove barriers to women's full participation in the political arena. Their concerns and voices must be expressed to represent their distinct issues authentically. This process would necessarily begin to address the male domination of political activities — in reserve communities and urban centres.

7g. That a process be established to address the gross inequities facing urban women who have lost their land base as a result of being forced to leave their reserve communities (while men maintained their land base throughout) after losing Aboriginal status under the *Indian Act*. This process must also address continued discrimination against women (under section 12 1(b) and later Bill C-31) and their offspring who are still in jeopardy of losing their treaty rights and land entitlement. Despite reinstatement of status through Bill C-31, sufficient land and resources have not been allotted to meet the needs of people wishing to return to their communities. The result has been great community and family conflict and tension over land and resources. This process must begin to account for the initial flaws of Bill C-31 and the discrimination against women that continues today.

7h. Also so that women who flee from abusive relationships do not have to live in high-crime, ghettoized areas where their children become victimized and where services are minimal at best — that sufficient emergency resources, including transitional housing, transportation, clothing, food and money, be available to them.

Healing

8a. Aboriginal people demand acknowledgement — by governments, churches and any other agencies involved with the establishment, development and implementation of the residential school system — of the horrendous atrocities committed against Aboriginal people in these institutions. For the protection of our future generations, our culture and our way of life, the Aboriginal peoples advocate that such an institution — or anything like it — never be established again. To this end we recommend that research be undertaken to document the work of all

institutions that have taken part in the cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples — adoption, foster care, justice. This body of research could focus on many themes, including investigation of the injuries suffered through multiple forms of abuse, whether physical, spiritual, mental, emotional or sexual, and of the premature deaths of the adult survivors of these institutions. Further, that sufficient resources (information, financial, human) be available to children of these institutions who wish to reunite with their families and to all Aboriginal people who have been affected adversely by these establishments to heal from the suffering they have endured.

8b. That more healing centres be established with appropriate resources to provide accessible services to all Aboriginal people in the urban centre; these centres would include focus on health, personal and family development and counselling using traditional healing methods and the incorporation of a critical history of colonization. And that learning circles be promoted and used for education, awareness and healing among Aboriginal people.

8c. That rural wilderness treatment and rehabilitative camps be established for Aboriginal people of all ages, particularly youth, ideally to be run by rural Aboriginal communities and tribal councils, where people would have access to traditional cultural technologies and survival skills, ceremonies and role models.

8d. That more Aboriginal people be funded to undergo training to become effective counsellors and facilitators in the healing centres, and that these training programs include elements of decolonization, unlearning racism and cultural awareness in service delivery.

8e. That longer-term alcohol and drug treatment facilities and aftercare co-op houses with education/job training be built and maintained at the urban community and reserve level. This approach assists with home community connections and with employment at the local level. Alcohol and drug treatment must include a historical overview of Aboriginal addictions and their connection to colonization and racism. Access to Alanon, Alateen and Alcoholics Anonymous at the reserve and community level — which are prepared to discuss the historical oppression of Aboriginal peoples and racism as triggers to undoing sobriety — is needed.

Resources/Economic Development

9a. That Aboriginal peoples' right to participation, consultation and decision making on the major development projects affecting their lives and territories be legislated as fundamental to these developments.

9b. That Aboriginal people have the freedom to promote economic activities such as gambling, casinos, hunting and fishing, and that small businesses using elders, crafts people, artists, writers, etc. be supported and promoted to boost employment and economic development within the urban Aboriginal community.

9c. That the government maintain and enhance the financial allocation for friendship centres and other urban organizations involved in the promotion and support of Aboriginal peoples.

9d. That funding be increased to create more culturally relevant services for Aboriginal people within federal penal institutions.

9e. That financial resources be available for the promotion of Aboriginal programming within communication and media institutions.

9f. That opportunities be created for Aboriginal people to obtain or purchase adequate housing in urban settings so that families can live in safe neighbourhoods.

9g. That Aboriginal communities join the modern technological network that is capable of facilitating networking and lobbying power, coalition building, and knowledge building with regard to children, youth and adults living in urban settings.

Decolonization and Unlearning Racism

10a. That all of the following organizations and institutions have comprehensive programs for decolonization, anti-racism training and cultural sensitivity as part of their training and continuing professional development: police departments, RCMP, correctional officers and justice organizations, social services, social workers, mental health professionals, community workers, youth workers and child welfare workers, medical services and professionals, alcohol and drug counsellors, teachers and educational services.

10b. That non-Aboriginal professionals have training to address issues related to urban migration. Often urban issues are extensions of what is taking place in rural communities.

10c. That systematic decolonization (Aboriginal and mainstream) be recognized as a national mental health priority and implemented in all education and human services practices in Canada.

10d. In recognition that decolonization implies throwing off the vestiges of privilege and oppression — because colonization requires a colonizer and the colonized — non-Aboriginal people must do their work in recognizing their privilege and how they consciously or unconsciously uphold and perpetuate the Canadian racist state. At the same time Aboriginal

people need to do our own work in empowering our people and recognizing how internalized racism makes us comply in our collective oppression. Therefore appropriate educational strategies to facilitate decolonization must be instituted.

Conclusion

Although this research was conducted to understand the issues of cultural identity for urban Aboriginal people, there is much that has been said here that can be generalized to all Aboriginal people. Much of what enhances or diminishes cultural identity is the same no matter where Aboriginal people live in Canada, although exposure to racism, for example, or social isolation might be experienced more intensely in the urban setting. In general, modern Aboriginal identity — whether rural or urban — has at its core the profound impact of the colonial assimilation strategies. Within this context, however, it is evident from the extensiveness of this report that identity is very personal and extremely complex. More important, when we set out to understand and describe identity we have to build constructs that are inclusive of all, or we may contribute to a subtle form of ethnic cleansing by narrowly defining who is and who is not a part of the community of Aboriginal people. From this research, it is clear that there is a spectrum of identity: at one end are people who choose to live their lives guided by traditional Aboriginal values and practices and at the other end are people who have substantially assimilated into the mainstream and experience little tension or anxiety about their lives. In the middle there are essentially two groups. First, there are those who are confused about their identity and how they can integrate the best of both cultures. These people experience great uncertainty, anxiety and tension over their identity — some to the point of self-destruction — as they are in a state of transition and change. The second group consists of those who have successfully integrated parts of their traditional Aboriginal culture with aspects of modern mainstream society to create a bi-cultural identity.

The categories are not closed, and some people may move between them. But across the spectrum a majority of the people are loyal to their Aboriginal identity and are choosing to continue to develop, explore and express it. In many respects they are reversing the destruction of colonialism in different ways: by critically educating themselves about the history of the Aboriginal peoples' relationship with governments, by learning about or practising the traditions of their specific nation, by politically organizing to lobby for recognition of their Aboriginal

rights, by creating art that tells their story or perhaps by retracing a blood line to a place or region or community where they can learn more about their ancestry. Whatever form it takes, there is a will to reverse the negative impact that social, political and economic marginalization has had on generations of their families.

In recognition of this trend, future policy direction must follow their lead and also focus on undoing all that has been done to diminish or obliterate Aboriginal cultural identity since contact. The policy strategies used by mainstream government to diminish Aboriginal identity have permeated all aspects of socialization, using all major institutions, including justice, education, economic, political, media, health, social, cultural and spiritual. The tactics were extremely comprehensive. Underlying the colonial agenda have been racist assumptions of Euro-Canadian superiority; patriarchal political structures that ensured Aboriginal people remained politically ostracized and ineffective; and the capitalist economic system that motivated the complete liquidation of lands and resources that were traditionally the source of livelihood for Aboriginal people, thus ensuring their poverty and dependence on the mainstream welfare system. Accordingly, the solutions and the policies that will be designed to reverse this horrendous violation of Aboriginal peoples' identity and way of life must also be comprehensive in nature and directed at the same institutional structures that were used to oppress them. Authentic healing and change can begin only when individuals with the power to design and implement new directions examine their own part in maintaining the colonial legacy. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people also have to unlearn the destructive behaviours and attitudes that allow oppression to continue in their daily personal and public relationships. Without question this course of change is threatening, as it calls on all of us to give up a part of ourselves that is familiar yet unhealthy. Fundamental transformation also forces us all to be vulnerable and, for some, to give up unearned privileges that have been granted and enjoyed at the expense of others.

Appendix 1 — Descriptive Analysis of the Victoria Métis Learning Circle

The group of Métis people for this learning circle consisted of six women and five men from all over Canada: Nova Scotia (Mi'kmaq), Ontario (Ojibwa), Manitoba, Saskatchewan (Cree), Alberta (Cree) and British Columbia. The members identify themselves as Métis for different reasons; some have a parent who is Aboriginal and one that is not, others have an Aboriginal grandparent whom they identify their Métis heritage with and one woman (who stated in her introduction that she felt out of place) is Aboriginal and married to a non-Aboriginal man. This group took place at the Victoria Friendship Centre.

The Present: Core Elements of Cultural Identity

Cultural duality is a theme that pervades most of the discussion on cultural identity as it relates to the individual, for these Métis people. In the list of key aspects generated by the group most of the entries reflect the tension that results from trying to find a balance between the two cultures; for example the following entries appear: feelings of loss and confusion, not feeling grounded in my culture, searching, desire to know more, inner struggle and reality of two faces (cultures). One woman replayed for the group a part of her internal dialogue with respect to the question: are you Aboriginal? "In my heart I am but in my mind I have been indoctrinated by the outside world."

The group members spoke about the "two faces" of their cultural identity as an individual, familial, community and societal phenomenon. One woman explained the two faces as she sees this dynamic operating in her life:

If you are having a struggle with identity and you have a mixed background, if you look in one direction, you get affirmation for that part of you. If you look in another direction you get affirmation of another part of you. But sometimes you can't get a clear vision of the whole of you from either place. So you have to develop that from yourself somehow and you have to find some kind of support for all the parts of you. And this is a historical thing too. I think for our parents' generation there were some parts of them that were really uncomfortable so what they did is stay away from that direction and just look for affirmation where they could get it and where they felt comfortable. So usually what happens is there is a part of you that is cut off. Often times, it seems to me, your children will pick up on that and they will be absolutely fascinated and attracted to the part of you that you cannot acknowledge. And so in my family one of my brothers is married to a treaty Indian woman and they have three status children.... I can see in the family there is a really strong pull to something that is not acknowledged.... People talk

about this anger. When there is some part of you that you don't acknowledge, usually there is some hurt feelings there and it comes out as anger.... If you approach your family's taboos, the way people keep you away from them is usually by some kind of threat. And one of the biggest threats is being cut off of love. So if you do have the persistence and tenacity to keep going closer to those taboos you are going to get some really hostile and negative reactions from people who are afraid of them. And you might also get some really supportive reactions because it is really complicated. It's interesting where the support comes from.

The experience for many participants is that within themselves, their family, their community or society they look one way and are validated for part of their identity and look the other way and get affirmation for another part of themselves — rarely did they feel the wholeness or balance of total acknowledgement or acceptance. In the end there is pain on both sides of their identity that leaves them feeling isolated, alone. The feelings and experience of most participants were summed up by the words of one woman who said, "The Indian community told me I was white and the white community told me I was Indian." Another woman gave the example of the Oka crisis as a tangible manifestation of the split — Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal — in the outside world. Still another woman shared a very emotional part of her inner struggle with the group; she gently wept for most of the time she spoke when she told the group,

I have, to a point, entered the Native community here but because I don't look Native [crying] I still have this self-consciousness like I don't belong there. But I also don't feel like I belong in the other community, the white community. And I also don't feel like I belong in the Métis community. It's like I belong everywhere but nowhere. But I keep going; I feel like I'm searching all the time.

Further, within the Métis nation itself there is an immense panorama of diversity. One of the men in the group remarked that he sometimes met Métis people to whom he had great difficulty relating; for this man part of being Métis meant skinning weasels and surviving in nature and then one day he met a man with an academic career and a doctoral degree who also claimed to be Métis yet seemed so foreign. In the end there is no definitive profile that sums up Métis cultural identity.

Members of the circle told stories of how their families were divided along cultural lines that forced them on one side or the other, never reconciling the two. For some speakers, certain family members were racist or became angry at them for exploring their Aboriginal heritage as an adult. This woman told the group about the first time she realized the impact of racism within her family:

I went to a non-status meeting one time and I met this Native woman who I spoke with about prejudice. And she said, "Sometimes it comes from your home." And I

said, "Oh no it doesn't come from my home." And I was in denial because I was denying that my father was one of the people who portrayed this prejudice. There was times he would get drunk and he would put my mother down and her family down. And I used to think, if the white people on the outside are making fun and my father is making fun — this man who is supposed to love my mother. These [Aboriginal] people have taught him everything he knows about the woods and how to survive. And he's still making fun. Where is the sense in all this? That was the first time I really started to face the denial even though I really didn't want to face it.

Racism fuelled the tensions in many families of the Métis participants; in turn, the racism was often internalized and the shame that it instilled became an unhealthy component of identity or it underlay the denial of identity. One woman described to the group how her non-Aboriginal mother was completely abandoned by her family for marrying her Ojibwa father. For the woman participating in the learning circle this meant she too felt her grandparents' abandonment and scorn but she never understood why. It also meant that her mother could never support the exploration and development of her Aboriginal identity, and often she actively suppressed her daughter's desire to grow in this way.

The same split occurs within each person; many of the participants could identify with the inner struggle of attempting to reconcile the two worlds. One woman spoke about part of her healing process where she envisioned an inner child who was Aboriginal; on the verge of tears throughout this passage she shared this with the group:

I've done a lot of inner child work recently...and in the visualizations we go back to find our inner child no matter what that child may look like to us. And every time I do it what I see...looks like me but it is a very Native looking little child. And, in order to love myself I cannot deny that child. I have to embrace that child, nothing else can stop me now. If I want to do that nothing is going to stop me. If I want to do that I can't deny it at the same time. So I have to push through all the barriers and use various ways of doing that from my own personal life. I hope I have the wisdom to do that so that people aren't being hurt by it.

In order to love herself, to feel whole, the woman told the group that she must embrace this long abandoned child but she and other members of the group saw hurdles in their families, their communities and their world that denied them the capacity to effectively embrace this part of their identity.

Interestingly, many of the participants had lighter coloured skin which allowed them to move between the two cultures. Although some told the group how they were rejected by both cultures, others stated that they dealt with the shame (a by-product of long-term intense racism) attached to being Aboriginal by completely denying that side of their heritage and immersing

themselves in the mainstream culture. Internally though, most of the people felt lonely and isolated, and longed to be understood by people they could share their experience with. One woman expressed this sentiment by stating: "To be with people who understand is a rare opportunity for me." For another person the importance of being heard and understood was very emotional.

For me to sit in this room and talk about this sort of thing is really emotional for me because it is something I haven't done a lot. Many people told the group that they felt they didn't look Aboriginal and so they were apprehensive about getting closer to Aboriginal people and groups. One woman spoke about how she was entitled to gain her Aboriginal status card but struggled with a feeling that, because she didn't "look Indian enough", she didn't feel she "deserved" the benefits of the card. This woman's Aboriginal father helped her reconcile these feelings by reminding her of all the pain and oppression his family endured before her. Another woman shared her experience of moving to a new city and trying to reach out to the Aboriginal community,

When I moved here and reached out to the Native people, all of a sudden I realized that I look white and my heart inside tells me I'm Native. There's times I wish, why couldn't my skin be a little darker? Why couldn't I have had that advantage so that at least somebody could say, "Okay, we can see you are part Native." But when I came to the friendship centre they said, "Do you have a status card?" and I laughed and said, "Yes I do!" It's hard to adjust to because you don't feel like you belong anywhere. I look white, I feel Native. But that doesn't really account for anything, you're just sort of floating.

Most people seemed to agree that as part of their identity there was a spiritual connection that they experienced with their Aboriginal community; this connection was not definable but all accepted its reality and validity. Participants experienced this spiritual feeling at different times. One woman said she felt it in the sweatlodge, at the Big House and at pow wows; she also told the group how she used her art work to help her develop her sense of cultural identity. Another man described his relationships with the Haida people of the Queen Charlotte Islands; over a period of time when he lived there he began to learn about the spiritual bond he felt with Aboriginal people by taking part in the feasts and ceremonies of these people. Other people identified their memories of ancestors that dwell within them as the link they feel to other Aboriginal people and a core aspect of their cultural identity. Similarly, other members focused on the internalized set of values they learned from family and community people in the same way. The spiritual link, which some felt was best expressed as a force of divine guidance in their

lives, was also as a source of internal strength. So the idea of a spiritual bond or common thread that unites Aboriginal and Métis people was diversely experienced but universal among the participants in the circle. To this end the group felt that there should be more places for Métis people to meet and support each other as external reinforcement, and validation of their identity is something that all desire and rarely experience.

Education often came up in the discussion of this learning circle. For some of the people education was central to their ability to begin accepting and feeling proud of their Aboriginal identity. Consistently, members told the group that when they found out about the history of Aboriginal people and the colonization process they were able to identify the source of shame and denial they harboured for much of their life. Given new understanding most people looked back over their lives and saw how widespread and oppressive racism has been in their lives and in the world around them — this was a major turning point for many people. Members of the circle also spoke of the importance of educating both the Aboriginal and mainstream communities about these issues using accurate and critical information to teach those who wish to learn. Two women were already involved in educating children and both said they began doing the work they do as a reaction to the destructive racism they experienced in their own lives. Others said their children were the reason they wanted to learn more about their cultural identity; although it was late in their own life it was important that their children have access to the information and feel less confused when it came to exploring their own identity.

The role of media as tools for education was raised by a man who had extensive experience in various media institutions. He pointed to examples of accurate and positive expressions of Aboriginal identity in currently running television programs; he stated the need for further development of these types of programs as there is immense potential for Aboriginal people to use these platforms to educate the public — both Aboriginal and mainstream — and destroy old stereotypes. This man described how through the urbanization process many Aboriginal people lost support and validation for their identity. In the city, from this man's perspective, Aboriginal people felt lost as media unloaded images that were foreign to their identity. He offered many insights into the role of media in identity; these are some of his words:

How does the message [of cultural pride] get across to a person who is suffering that pain and that anxiety...[about identity] when there is no fortification, there is no reinforcement. We all need that reinforcement. We need...[validation]... Within the Aboriginal community...the more isolated you are the better chance you have

of retaining those cultural components of your life. When you get in the city, and we're talking about urbanization, you confront the same kinds of problems that a lot of people do when they come from a rural environment where they are self-dependent, self-assertive, doing their own thing, and all of a sudden we end up in the city. And now we've got all of this pressure on us to conform to some mysterious thing that we can't identify what it is we have to conform to. And young people will feel that most strongly.... In an urban environment the Native person is lost. It's almost as though they've gone invisible.... like when you have the feeling that you've disappeared inside. "I've forgotten who the heck I am. I don't know who I am today." Because you look in the mirror and there doesn't seem to be anybody there. Well fundamentally our mirror now has become the television set. And whether we like it or not media, advertising — look around Us...coke, Sprite, potato chips, Oh Henry chocolate bars...you have all this stuff unloading on you and you're supposed to now identify yourself. Where do you identify yourself in this? I think a person's Nateness begins to erode at that point because we can't see ourselves on the screen.

This man went on to say that even though the media have contributed to diminishing urban Aboriginal identity, things are changing. He cited a popular television program (North of 60) as an example of media presentation of a more human and believable portrait of modern Aboriginal people. Now it is possible to use the media to reverse the process of distortion and omission in order to present an authentic expression of Aboriginal peoples' lives, their culture and their history. This man strongly advocated that Aboriginal people continue to harness the immense power that is available through the media.

The Past: Significant Places, People, Events, Experiences

Some of the most powerful moments in the two-day group with the Métis people came when one of the participants spoke about her painful experiences resulting from going to residential school. Whenever this woman spoke, her residential school experience was a theme that eventually surfaced, as there was not a part of her life it did not touch, even today — "It [residential school] is like an open sore eating away at you." Through tears and with the support of a facilitator (verbally supporting her and embracing her), this woman told the group that when she left the institution she had no place to turn; in her confusion and despair she attempted to kill herself and almost succeeded. In the course of this time of desperation she thought, I can't let them do this to me — something she heard herself say for the first time in her life. Upon reflection she realized that "them" was the priests and nuns who worked at the residential school. This woman attributes her silence, like the silence of many Aboriginal people, to her time at the school, where

They told us we couldn't talk about the brothers, nuns or priests. I think that is why our people are so silent about this. They told us we would burn in hell [if we spoke].

Realizing the source of much of her suffering was an important turning point for her as it enabled her to enter counselling and begin a process of healing the devastating impact the school had on her and on her family and community.

Under the general heading of family, the group members identified a number of different themes that were important to their cultural identity. For example, in one woman's story, visiting her father's reserve on summer holidays as a child was a very pleasurable memory that she shared with the group. The reserve community of her father's family was a loving and accepting environment that was a contrast to her life in mainstream society. (This sentiment was echoed by other members who had positive memories of going to visit the local reserve where they may have had family members living.)

It was almost like going to another planet for me... I liked it, I liked it a lot. The people there, I remember the women mostly, they were just so good to me. I felt like they loved me more than my own mother. They were just more available to me and just the way they looked at me. I don't remember a lot of things from my childhood but this I do. When they looked at me I felt...liked they loved me. And I didn't feel that from my mother and from her family.

For this woman, most of the turning points in her life with respect to her Aboriginal identity involved her relationship to her father who was Ojibwa — childhood memories, parents separating, his death, and subsequent relations with his brothers. She spoke with great emotion and cried as she conveyed to the group the increasing levels of separation she experienced from her father up to his death, and her subsequent efforts to reclaim the cultural legacy he left her. She also wept when telling the group her feelings once she became a mother; at this time she felt greater urgency to continue the heritage of her father's side of the family, realizing she was part of a continuum that was important to carry on.

Other group members spoke of their efforts to trace a family map by various means. Some people talked of their frustration with government policies of blocking their access to information about past family members. One man stated angrily, "I know exactly where the information is but the Alberta government protects it from me." Commonly group members experienced lack of support, denial and anger from other family members who preferred to keep the Aboriginal heritage of their ancestors buried; for some of the people engaged in this task the defensiveness only made them want to try harder to uncover this long-lost secret. Different group

members went to great lengths to learn more about their blood heritage and Aboriginal ancestry. One young man travelled to different cities to contact his birth mother, whom he met for the first time when he was 25. Another woman took her holiday time to travel the geographic area of her family in Saskatchewan in order to search for any information at all — finally uncovering the name of her grandmother in the back of a book in a gift store at one of the Métis cultural centres. In the days following this event, the most significant moment of her life in this woman's estimation, she travelled the region to find out more about the Métis history and, eventually, about her family in the provincial archives. Throughout these searches, people commonly felt led by divine guidance or fate as they searched hungrily for the next morsel of information that would connect them to a piece of their history and their identity.

Obtaining a status card, or not obtaining one, was an experience that people in the group occasionally spoke of. For one woman the card was important because it was a concrete symbol of her belonging and identity as an Aboriginal person. Here is an excerpt that gives some idea of her internal struggle:

My dad really encouraged to do it...I had to really think about it.... In a way I felt like I haven't lived like an Indian. You know, the stereotype I guess. That was what I was comparing my life to and I was thinking, I don't know if I should do that. You know, I don't know if I deserved to have that. And he said that my grandparents were Indian people and they lost a lot. And anything you can do to make your life good you can think of them and that makes it okay. So to me it was really significant getting my status. Even though it is only a word. In a way it also sort of makes real something that has been an idea in my head for a long time. On one level it makes it real. [Facilitator: What idea does it make real?] That I am a Native person. Even though it is an Indian affairs thing, the whole thing about status and all that. But it still, to me, has been significant. I think if I didn't have that I would have felt more hesitant about going back to the reserve to visit this thanksgiving. And it got me thinking about my grandparents more. And just going through that whole process and thinking about it and reading through all the newspapers my dad sent me and all the old birth certificates. It was all this real information that was in front of me and it got me thinking about it in a different way.

Beyond the tangible validation of identity the process for application itself was clearly a profound experience that helped this woman re-engage with her Aboriginal lineage and identity. Another woman told the group of how she felt victimized by racism for the first time in her life as a result of trying to use her status card to buy glasses. This woman, who looks very Caucasian, found a pair of glasses she wanted to buy on sale but when the clerk found out she wanted to use the status card she was informed that she could not have the sale price. At a time in her life when

she was only beginning to delve into and feel proud about her Aboriginal heritage, this incident had a deep emotional impact.

Other group members pointed out how Bill C-31 created government-defined divisions among Aboriginal people that had nothing to do with their families and communities. A good example of this dynamic was expressed by a woman who lost her status because she married a white man; she told the group how she suddenly felt like an outsider or traitor, like she didn't belong in the community where she grew up and her family and friends were still living.

Experiences of racism were often part of the group's discussion and important to their sense of Aboriginal identity. Though it is often a devastating and pervasive force in people's lives, for some group members it made them more determined to learn and grow in their understanding and pride of Aboriginal history and culture. Because these people are of mixed heritage most of them are not easily identified as Aboriginal people. Accordingly, many of them were aware of the racism around them but they were able to avoid it directly as they could deny their Aboriginal heritage and traverse between the two worlds with relative ease.

One last significant experience for many of the group members had to do with either active alcoholism or recovery from addictions. People in the group spoke at different times about how they were at their absolute worst because of their alcoholism or drug abuse. However, many experienced a turning point in recovery where they became more sensitive, more humane, more insightful or perhaps healthier because they went through a recovery process. For example, one woman told the group how she grew up with alcoholism in her family and that experience made her more determined to lead a sober adult life. Another man told the group about his life of confusion and addiction that led him to end up in jail; because of the insights he has received during the recovery process he has been able to see some positive aspects of going through alcoholism.

Barriers: Diminishment and Denial of Cultural Identity

The people in the Victoria Métis learning circle felt they were denied access to their ancestral or familial knowledge. One after another they told stories of their search for information about their family heritage that was buried in the shame of internalized racism (integrating the racist attitudes and/or beliefs of the dominant society into one's self-concept and impressions of all Aboriginal people) within their families. One woman described what she felt denied of as "the

story"; she said she wasn't exactly sure what it was this referred to but she felt the need to somehow "rebuild all the bridges [so she] could have stories to pass on" to her children and future generations. Similarly, with strong emotion and sometimes tears others pointed to the deep loss in their own lives and stated that they didn't want their children to live with the ambiguity and insecurity they often felt.

There was anger mixed with sadness and grief when participants spoke about how their families denied everything that was indicative of their Aboriginal heritage. In one woman's words it is a denial of "an understanding of who I am". For another woman the feeling of "peacefulness and acceptance" was the part of herself that was missing along with the knowledge of her family's Aboriginal heritage. In general, speakers felt they lost a feeling of "oneness or wholeness" within their families. One man felt that, through the residential schools, Aboriginal people lost their ability to give and receive love and affection; accordingly, the "family unity" that is central to the transmission of values and tradition was completely devastated. Similarly, people felt denied of a community that they could reach and call home — a place to learn about their family, history and tradition.

When people spoke about their family history they also brought up the issue of language as a part of their Aboriginal cultural identity that they will likely never have access to in their lives. None of the people in this circle spoke the Aboriginal language of their family and some of the members felt a hole in their life for this reason. A woman who lost her language through the multi-generational residential school experiences of her family stated that going to the school felt like they "were being programmed into a different culture." The effects of the "programming" were noticeable within the first six months — in her first visit back to the reserve community she was beginning to feel alienated from friends and family. While some members did not know what language their forebears spoke, others who did know had hopes of learning to speak at least some of their ancestral language. Others spoke of songs, dances, stories, arts, medicines and spirituality in a similar light; they also wished to learn about these other aspects of their family tradition and they did not feel they had access to teachers of this information. Some of the participants also said that their expression of certain facets of their ancestry was denied simply because they had nobody to share with who could understand what they were expressing. One woman felt this type of barrier when it came to exploring spiritual beliefs from her Mi'kmaq background.

Lack of accurate information about the history of colonialism and Aboriginal cultures is widespread. For many people the misinformation did not match their life experience, so they felt negatively invalidated or blamed themselves for not living up to popular stereotypes of Aboriginal people — such as the image of possessing special spiritual powers or a deep relationship to the animals and nature. Similarly, witnessing the stereotyping of other Aboriginal people was an oppressive experience for group members since many could hide their Aboriginalness but still felt included as the target of racism. One man who grew up in an isolated Métis colony told the group how he was taught to be proud of being a "breed" (a term he prefers to "Métis", a government term imposed on his people). This man expressed his feelings of despair ("it almost makes me want to give up") at the serious lack of accurate information that circulates within and outside the Métis community about their history and traditions. The lack of accurate information is a pervasive force that is manifest throughout the mainstream culture and it was experienced as a major barrier by most of the participants. One woman told the group that she feels the oppressive weight of misconception and ignorance in the academic environment of the university. In the university she felt she was often trying to justify her art, work that expresses her Aboriginal heritage, to professors trained in European theories of art — since they did not really understand her work they didn't value it. She told the group that, in general, she felt that the university environment clashed with her sense of Aboriginal values and identity. This woman also told the group about an experience in high school where she confronted a teacher for making racist remarks about Aboriginal people that were based on lack of information; the teacher's response was to belittle her into silence. A frustrating part of this incident for this woman was that although she knew the teacher was not telling the whole story she didn't have the information to support her argument. In general, the Métis people in this learning circle experienced similar forms of institutionalized racism by the churches, employers, the media, governments and prisons; without exception the experiences of racism at the hands of these institutions were fundamental barriers for the exploration, development and expression of Aboriginal identity.

When the members of the circle spoke about alcohol they expressed different perspectives on the issue. A younger man told the group that he feels angry and sad when he hears white people degrading Aboriginal people for public drunkenness — his response is to defend the Aboriginal people. This man also expressed anger and hatred toward his Aboriginal

mother who gave him up to a foster home when he was a baby. While he could understand some of the pain Aboriginal people have endured, he could not let go of the hatred he felt for his mother for giving him up so young. He believed her addiction to alcohol denied him a family and the knowledge of his ancestry. Some of the older speakers had endured their own struggles with alcohol; said one man, "The biggest problem — and I lived with it — was the bottle." From their perspective alcohol was a form of escape from the pain and confusion they experienced in their families and communities. One man stated that when Aboriginal people came to the urban centres they lost their sense of identity and in the disorientation and pain of this transition they began to drink. For this man putting a person through an addictions detoxification program was an insufficient response to the problems of Aboriginal people. He believes there is a need to develop programs to extend the healing process further and create some meaningful future prospects for individuals and communities.

Empowerment: Cultural Identity Strengthened and Enhanced

Though the participants discussed stereotyping and the lack of accurate information as stifling phenomena in their lives, they also examined the issues from another perspective. Most of the group members talked about how positive — refreshing, transforming — it was for them to learn a more factual account of history and reality that validated their Aboriginal identity. When members began to acquire this new information much of their past experience became understandable; though many felt angered by the government's treatment of Aboriginal people, this information allowed them to feel pride about their ancestors and traditions.

Group members also discussed how it strengthened their sense of identity to see accurate information and believable, contemporary portrayals of Aboriginal people's lives in the mainstream media. For example, one man said that some of the recent television programs characterize Aboriginal people along a much more diverse spectrum than the cliché-ridden movies and programs of the past; the characters are more human and present realistic expressions of Aboriginal identity. Similarly, reading books written by Aboriginal people and visiting museums and cultural centres helped some members learn more about, and feel a stronger sense of, their Aboriginal identity and pride.

Associating with Aboriginal groups such as the Métis political organizations or the Aboriginal student union was a way some members felt supported in their developing sense of

identity. In these groups members felt support and they came into contact with people who could understand their struggles more intimately than any other group of people. Also, these groups, alone and as a network, become vehicles of political power that bolster a sense of pride and purpose for people in the learning circle. Institutionally, the friendship centre was referred to repeatedly as a place where members could feel the same support and acceptance. It was also a place where participants gained important social contacts, information and services that were important to their learning process. For many, the friendship centre is the core of their urban Aboriginal community. Associating with other Aboriginal people was important to group members because it offered them a chance to tell their story and listen to others tell theirs; in doing so, everybody would learn and possibly add to their own with what was shared by others. In the same way, sharing songs, dances, history, ceremony, spirituality and other traditional information with other Aboriginal people was strengthening for the members of the learning circle. Some women spoke about the importance of going to elders for this information while other people were not as specific about the Aboriginal people they consulted. In meeting with other Aboriginal people the members of the group were also exposed to a broader spectrum of contemporary expressions of Aboriginal identity that served to shatter old stereotypes.

For one of the women creating her art gave here a feeling of empowerment. For her, the process of expressing something with art is very intuitive and she believed that it allowed her to tap into and express "ancestral knowledge" that she is not consciously aware of. While this process, and the end product, is often challenged by mainstream academics, she receives a great deal of support for her work from Aboriginal mentors who use similar methods. In the end it is a rewarding and independent way that she learns about her Aboriginal identity.

Under the topic of families, one woman felt strengthened in her resolve to learn more about her ancestral heritage and Aboriginal history and tradition in general as a reaction to her mother denying this information to her. This young woman said she liked to hunt for things that were hidden from her, and she laughed as she stated that she was the kind of person who would peek into her presents before Christmas day. For older participants in the group, the fact that they wanted to pass on information about their heritage to their children was an important motivating factor on their own path of discovery. Realizing the great hole they felt in their own lives, many members spoke with a hint of desperation when they expressed the importance of fortifying the next generation with accurate information about their ancestors and traditions.

Two Communities: Aboriginal and Mainstream

In this exercise the participants were asked to draw two pie charts to illustrate the relative influences on their cultural identity of significant phenomena in each community — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Here is a tabular depiction of the components of each community that the participants focused on in their diagrams and discussion. The impact of each issue (positive or negative) and the emphasis (the portion of the circle covered by the section detailing the issue) vary with each person's representation of the two communities, but there are some general themes that did arise in the group that we will try to depict here.

Aboriginal	Mainstream
family: lack of access to or knowledge of (-); separation from (-); as source of support, knowledge and validation of identity (+)	mainstream values: mostly (-) as they are used to diminish or invalidate Aboriginal values and identity
land and water (+)	family: when denying Aboriginal identity (-), as support (+)
education\residential school: as strategy for cultural genocide and source of suffering (-), acquisition of knowledge and skills (+)	education: when authentic and critical about Aboriginal issues (+), to learn employment skills (+), when racist or inaccurate (-)
employment: for esteem and financial resources (+), lack of employment opportunities (-)	popular media: when used to generate racism and misconceptions (-), as a tool to be used by Aboriginal people to educate mainstream public authentically (+)
stories about the family, community, the nation (+)	government: as supportive of some useful programs (+), as an advocate and mechanism of assimilation and control (-)
alcohol and drugs (-)	friends (+)
friends (+)	racism (-)
church: racism, contributing to shame, confusion (-), source of spiritual direction, community (+)	unknown part of identity (-)
spirituality (+)	alcohol and drugs (-)
elders/healers (+)	colonization (-)
political organizations: as representing concerns and providing platform to meet and organize (+), internal conflict or nepotism (-)	bill c-31: as validating identity in a tangible way (+), creating division in Aboriginal community (-)
community: source of belonging, sense of place (+), when unknown or lacking (-)	counselling/healing (+)

healing (+)	prison/justice system (-)
language (+), lack of access to (-)	lack of support for or reflection of Aboriginal identity (-)
all forms of abuse (-)	employment: as livelihood (+), with Aboriginal people (+), lack of access to (-)
reflections of identity (+)	industry/business: as anti-environmental (-)
traditions (+)	arts/culture (+)
art (+)	pro-Aboriginal organizations (+)
unknown (-)	environmental destruction (-)

While comparing the two communities this group of Métis people spoke often about how they felt the values of the mainstream community stifled their ability to express their Aboriginal identity: "All-encompassing...European values...don't reflect back...my Native values." Participants felt the government and the media were the main forces of the mainstream community as it negatively affects the identity of Aboriginal people. In general people in the group felt that government-imposed regulations about who was or was not Aboriginal (Bill C-31) simply created divisions in the Aboriginal community; more important, government restrictions left many Métis people out of the 'Aboriginal' umbrella entirely. Additionally, the group identified the media as the main voice for reflecting and espousing mainstream values. Still, the group did acknowledge the potential benefits of using media as educational tools to present accurate and contemporary images of Aboriginal lifestyles, thus correcting old and damaging stereotypes.

With respect to both communities, most members identified the importance of their families — nuclear and extended. Some people felt their link to the Aboriginal side of their family was important as an access point to their Aboriginal community and identity. It was through these people that group members were able to find out more about their heritage, including language, stories, arts, political information, family lineage, and various areas of information about the traditions of their nation. On the negative side, many peoples' families were also barriers to nurturing Aboriginal identity because relatives were trying to deny their linkage to Aboriginal heritage. One woman told the group that her experience of elders was generally negative — in contrast to the commonly held image of the benevolent, wise and nurturing teacher — because the elders in her family tried to dissuade her from simply learning

about their Métis forebears. Other members also told stories about racism within families that had had a similar effect on their sense of cultural identity — at best the participants reported minimal support from family members.

Education was another component of both communities in many people's circles. Commonly, the mainstream schooling system had a negative effect on Aboriginal identity because people, if they were exposed to any information at all, were exposed to inaccurate or blatantly racist accounts of Aboriginal history and culture. In the mainstream community the role of education was also positive at times reflecting the fact that people learned skills for employment and further education. For one woman, post-secondary education was, in some ways, a refreshing change from the racism she endured in elementary and high school. Only in college and university did she begin to experience some degree of support and independence to study issues that were important to her — though even in higher education she struggles with the discord of values between the two communities.

In the circle diagrams depicting the Aboriginal community, education often referred to a process whereby people were exposed (often later in life) to accurate historical accounts of the colonization process and Aboriginal culture that allowed them to understand their lives without feeling shameful. Many of the participants expressed feelings of empowerment or transformation resulting from exposure to this type of new information — most of the people in the circle also hungered for continued learning.

Another aspect of the Aboriginal community depictions that was almost universal for these participants was the place of land and sea or nature. In the discussion the speakers often identified the natural environment as a healing force or sanctuary in their lives — "I get my nourishment from the land and...I get my nourishment from the sea as well." Interestingly, environment was addressed in the mainstream circles only as something that was lacking or being destroyed; it was never portrayed as something positive or valued.

Alcohol was an issue that most people included in their Aboriginal community circle as having a negative effect on their cultural identity. For the most part people identified as positive only their reaction to alcoholism — for example, they don't drink today because of the destruction and pain they witnessed as a youth, or they consider themselves more humble and insightful about people as a result of their own recovery process.

Spirituality is another large positive section for many of the participants in this learning

circle. In general people identified the Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and practices as healing forces in their lives. One speaker said that he could always go back and forth between the communities but the important spiritual lessons have come from the Aboriginal. In contrast, some speakers identified the churches and the mainstream community in general as being, for the most part, devoid of spirituality. One woman spoke with directness and certainty: "I never got any sense of spirituality from the church. Absolutely none!" This statement echoes those expressed by the woman who went to residential school, who stated that the religion of the school actually diminished her spirit.

Recommendations

1. Aboriginal people receive assistance to train and prepare for administration and management positions so we can administer our own affairs. Aboriginal people must be involved in the input to ensure accuracy at all levels, e.g., local, provincial, federal.
2. Accurate, culturally relevant and historical information must be developed and implemented by Aboriginal elders for all levels of education; this would include developing culturally relevant resource materials and curriculum.
3. Devise strategies to address the needs of (a) individuals, (b) families and (c) communities in regard to Métis cultural identity; this would entail the research and development of accurate history of Métis people including (a) geographic location, (b) ethno-cultural affiliation, (c) lifestyles of community/rural base and (d) socio-political influences.
4. Establish Métis cultural centres within urban settings.
5. Make available seed grants for the promotion of Aboriginal programming within communication/media systems, including culturally based activities.
6. Government and churches make public acknowledgement of the grave injustice done to our people through the residential school system.

Conclusion

In the Victoria Métis learning circle it seemed that many people lived their lives in the mainstream culture and were in a process of trying to regain parts of their ancestral heritage from reluctant family members. For many, their Aboriginal background had been buried for generations so many were unsure of how to nurture a resurgence in their own lives. For others, they have had close contact with Aboriginal people but choose to make their lives in the mainstream culture for a variety of reasons, including to avoid racist victimization, for greater

access to economic power, education or a wider range of lifestyle choices. The group often spoke of the "two faces" that dwell within them and are validated separately in the outside world by two different communities. In the end, to feel whole, many have to find strength within themselves to integrate these two parts of their identity.

Appendix 2 — Descriptive Analysis of the Winnipeg Métis Learning Circle

In the Winnipeg Métis learning circle there were twelve participants, seven men and five women, ranging in age from 29 to 52. The facilitator felt that the group was reserved and slow to share in-depth personal accounts in the circle. At a social function during the two-day period, one group member told the facilitator that the participants were hesitant because they feared personal attack and lack of confidentiality from one of the group members who had a reputation for disrespecting such forums. In terms of data collection, the entire first day's proceedings were lost because of a technical failure; this left only the discussion from day two available for analysis.

The Present: Core Elements of Cultural Identity

The group talked about the core elements of their cultural identity during the first day (thus there is no record of their discussion); fortunately they clarified some important points at the beginning of day two. Early in the discussion the topic turned to why it is difficult to convey, in the limited setting of the learning circle, a true picture of the Métis identity. This woman illustrated a number of different aspects of her Métis identity:

For us to explain a lot of what you are asking us is not a simple matter. You are asking us to explain a lifetime of learning in a five minute [segment]...like here [pointing to the flip chart point-form notes] these are one liners but unless you attach an explanation to each of the one liners, they don't mean anything! It's a condensation, a watering down. Then there are the language barriers. You are asking us to interpret into English and that becomes very difficult, because it is very personal and because it's bringing it out into a formal setting. You are asking us to relate and make statements by consensus. For Métis people that is a frustrating experience because we have always been able to speak and express our uniqueness... We can be as respectful as we want to be and nod our heads...but in the meantime if we don't agree we should be able to go into the back and fight it out. Because that is the way we are... In some cases...I relate to the community members and sometimes they don't think we get along because we're screaming and yelling and joking and insulting each other. But that's the way we bring ourselves back to the culture. For us culture means community. We have our own way of dealing with each other. And yet for those on the outside they may think, "None of you think alike." Or "You couldn't be from the same community." And they don't understand that we are very very close! [banging hand on table for emphasis] And that's the way we relate to each other. So...call it confusion, call it being unclear, no focus...but... the task itself is horrendous. What you're asking us to do in two days is...generations and generations of learning.

From this woman's perspective, part of the identity of the Métis community is this need

to define, to engage in debate, to expose conflict in order to understand the issues central to their unique culture. In fact, the group spent a great deal of time trying to define who belongs to the Métis nation and ended with the notion that membership is defined by birth, by self-identification and by acknowledgement from the community. In short, the members of the circle stated that they were tired of explaining to people or defending their status as a member of the Métis nation; further, it was agreed that membership definition was not a problem of the Métis person so much as the problem of the person who questions them. When speaking about these issues people seemed irritated at being asked repeatedly (throughout their lives) to tell their story, to explain themselves.

When asked to identify what makes them culturally unique, as compared to other Aboriginal people, the members were adamant in their responses. This woman spoke with certainty, pride, and a little anger on what makes Manitoba Métis cultural identity unique:

I think everybody is going to say they have a unique sense of humour. I think you have to be around to get the subtlety and the difference of the joke telling and the story telling — I think someone called it bullshitting [group laughs] — you'll get a sense of it. But traditionally, stories about your grandfather or your uncle, funny stories that people carry on. It's laughing at ourselves and laughing at our follies — bringing that forward — and that is part of the sense of humour.

In terms of music and dance traditions — First Nations, their music and dance traditions, I think, are very different. They have drumming and a unique style of singing. With Métis it's fiddling and guitar...French songs...distinctly Métis...Cree songs...Saulteaux songs that are distinctly Métis in origin and you won't hear First Nations singing and carrying on that tradition. That's part of what makes us unique.... The dance, the Red River Jig. Just jigging steps...there are...15 to 18...depending on who you talk to...these are things that are distinctly Métis and that makes us different. First Nations people don't jig, they do fancy dances and they do pow wows and whatever they do. I don't pretend to know how to even tell the difference in what they are doing, to me it all looks the same. That sounds really awful but I don't study First Nations people. Métis people, they will jig and they have competitions and it's a matter of pride, jigging. And doing it right! And changing when the music changes. And getting the steps just so. It is something that has been carried on through the years. There are people who are 80 years old that can jig like you wouldn't believe. And there was someone who was 11 years old that was in a jigging competition. And this is carried on and it makes us unique because the only people who do it are us — Métis people!

...The sense of family and the sense of helping each other out. I know that First Nations have the concept of extended family but it's a little bit different — there's a subtle difference there. Maybe if I can relate it to another culture. Let's say you are talking about someone who's Chinese from Hong Kong and someone who's Chinese from another part of China and they have two different cultures.

They might look the same physically and they might seem to speak the same — the way they sound and the syllables. And they might seem to dress the same but there are subtle differences between the two of them — the way they were raised and the traditions and that kind of thing. So you have to think of it that way: there are subtle differences and then there are some big differences. I'm talking about the music. I'm talking about the dance. In terms of the extended family...some of these become such catch phrases that they become almost a language within the group. I know what I'm saying when I say 'extended family' [to another Métis person]...but to someone outside the group it might mean something to them but it doesn't necessarily mean the same thing we are talking about.... I'm struggling with this to try and verbalize it because it has been a long time since I've had to explain it to someone who is not a part of it.... It's hard to put it into words and quantify these things. But say, for example, at Christmas time or for any old excuse the family gets together. Or the way a brother-in-law or sister-in-law, nephew or niece will come over and do something for you, because you need it done, without asking. Or will bring you something. They may come and shovel your driveway, or bring you food or take you out somewhere. That kind of thing. Or just show up at your house to visit and pass the time. And maybe that's something that First Nations people can lay claim to as well, but it's part of being Métis. That sense of family. Getting together and enjoying each other's company, enjoying that sense of family, the love and the community. And not just family but other members that are friends of the family and so forth. To me that's a big part of being Métis — knowing that you can walk into a Métis family and feel welcome whether you are a stranger or not. You are made to feel like you belong there. And you are not made to feel like you have to prove yourself or you have to behave in a certain way but you are accepted because you are.

...So the group in Victoria...they are isolated and they are not educated as to what it is to be Métis. And they feel a little lost. They feel a little isolated. I can understand, I've met people who are Métis from B.C. who are confused and lost because there's a lot of pressure there to become a part of the UNN [United Native Nations] or this Louis Riel association or whatever it is. And there's the Pacific Métis Federation and Lord knows what else...Who do you go to? And who can strengthen and nurture that identity? It's difficult. So I can see where they are coming from and I can feel their pain...

This excerpt covers some central aspects of what this woman felt represented the Métis identity as compared to other Aboriginal groups and Métis people outside Manitoba. One of the men in the group focused further on the difference between this group of Métis and the Métis people who live in British Columbia (where the other Métis learning circle was held):

We know where our blood lines are. We know through family history where we are from, our own self history and things like that. With them, they don't know where their blood line is coming from because walls [in the family when they ask questions about ancestry] go up. They associate themselves with Indigenous people around the world. Where we are not trying to associate with Indigenous people around the world because we are our own people here.... out there all they

have is the Native side of being Métis...they're confused because...they relate to Native spirituality ...

Another participant had this to add:

I strongly believe that it's education. I believe that if I moved to B.C. in 1960, and grew up there and never came back here, there are a lot of things that I would have missed out on and I would have probably presented myself in B.C. in the way you are saying [confused]. ...the history all originated here. Basically the Métis community of Canada, it gradually moved to the northwest, and the east and then some into the States. I think there is a sense here in Manitoba that you damn well have to! Over there you can get away with hiding easier. Or assimilating easier. Here it's not so easy. It's much more easy to identify yourself as Métis here than it would be in B.C. And I think that it is not a problem, it is just education — simple. We have to know!

Clearly the music and dance tradition is quite distinct; but the facilitator tried to get the group members to clarify how, for example, the importance of the extended family is a value that is distinct to the Métis. In response other members of the group rallied around the issue of family; in the following passage another woman alludes to the fact that the family is primary to the individual's identity:

It becomes again a family thing — your whole kinship system and how you have been reared. They [community people] know instantly...your whole biography. They know where you came from, who you are, how you've been raised and who actually did all that.... When you go back or if you go to another community they won't ask you so much who you are but who are your parents, your grandparents...that whole identity thing of family. It's a very big thing in the Métis community, because it carries a lot of weight. The respect that is given you is again the family. And the respect your family has gained through those relationships has been strongly developed.... it's like you're carrying more than just a name, it's a whole history of your family...it's...accomplishments, respectability...background history... Because people may not even know you but if they know your sibling, your aunt, your uncle, particularly your parents, then the friendship and generosity shown to you, a lot of times, exemplifies that.... And you can't get away from that. The individuality is completely dismantled at that point.

Yet another speaker used the analogy of a piece of rope to describe her understanding of how Métis families and communities rear their young. From her perspective families allow you the room — give you enough rope — to expand yourself, but when you return to the community the rope is shortened because the people test you on whether the lessons you learned in the mainstream community are acceptable to the Métis. In short, they give you a lot of room but at the same time they correct you and, if needed, they pull you back into the fold of the community or family. A man in the group used his own experience to illuminate this issue. Talking about his

own children he said,

I give them enough rope to hang themselves. [laughs]...I give them a lot of slack and when I know they are going to screw up...then I pull it back and I say, "This is what you were doing. And this is what could have happened if you would have kept going. So I thought I'd stop you and have you look at what would have happened if you would have done this. And I'm not saying that's wrong or right, but let's take a look at it."

Another woman added to his example:

And I want to take that one step beyond because what I'm saying is that's something we do individually with our own kids — we do it as a family — to take care of peer pressure and things. And we do it as a community as well; when you go back to your community you know very quickly what are the right things to do and what are not the proper things to do.... it's just the way we learn and the way we practise...the learning phase is how we do things individually and we extend that to the extended family and even further to the community. Because there is a very distinct interaction of how we relate to each other in the house, and in the neighbourhood and in the context of the community. There is a proper way to relate.

The rope metaphor could be applied to many different aspects of the Métis culture, including, for example, the subtlety of the language, the traditions, and child rearing. Many of the participants in the group seemed to agree that this is a way of maintaining long-established roles and relationships in the community.

After focusing on the family, the members of the learning circle began a long discussion on the place of language in the modern Métis culture. From their conversation one learned very quickly that language is an extremely complex aspect of these people's lives; beyond the mere longing to learn an ancestral language, there are a number of different languages and language combinations that dictate for communicating in families and communities:

When I speak to my uncle we speak Saulteaux and English and French — *mélangé* — all mixed together. And if somebody was to walk in there, whether it be an Englishman a French person or a Saulteaux person, they wouldn't understand a bit of what we were talking about.... and we'll *constantly* laugh!...you see, what I gather of French Michif is that I can relate to this person who speaks French and we have always recognized ourselves as speaking French. As a young person...I spoke very openly. But when I speak to...an educated French person...I'm very set back in speaking my French because I feel that I'll create a flaw or that I have to make excuses for my language.... if a...Parisian French person went [to my community] and started talking to me, we'd lose parts of the conversation because of that [difference in language use].

Within families the combination of languages used is often extremely complex and, as we see in the next excerpt, defines relationships between people and generations:

Our language in my community, and at one time it was a Michif community, my grandma speaks to us in Plains Cree Michif...and we have to respond in the same way. But my mom, when she speaks to us she speaks to us in *Saulteaux* so we have to respond in *Saulteaux*. My father speaks to my uncle...[using] nothing but Plains Cree. But they'll be carrying on in their conversation, as siblings, and they'll turn around to the next generation and it will be different. And they speak to their parents and grandparents, again, in a different dialect. So if you have a family gathering it is three languages but you switch quickly, it's sort of an automatic thing. I cannot speak to my uncle in Cree Michif because that would be insulting. I have to speak to him the way he speaks to me. Which is the only acceptable norm, I can only respond to him in *Saulteaux*. Whereas, with my grandma, I have to respond to her in her language. And that's the way...it's like a law! You have to do it. It's the unwritten law. And then the cousins do their own thing. It depends where they are [from]...we speak differently. So the relationships change and they become, in many ways, unique languages.

These languages and language groupings are unique to the Métis people of Manitoba. At one point in this passionate and sometimes very humorous discussion, one of the men raised an important point about the decline of language use and the need for preservation:

The Michif language that we speak...amongst my family...is unique. I read an article about the Gaelic language and how it's being lost through the generations. And I cut out the article because I found it interesting because it brought me back to...my uncle, he's 80 years old now. And that language is being lost in the same fashion that the Gaelic language is being lost. Because...it's an oral language and it's never been written, with that, we're losing it. And I think it's time that the Métis people try to establish that language before it is completely gone.

These sentiments met with approval from the group.

As another representation of the core elements of the unique Métis culture, one of the men spoke about artefacts of the Métis (including thousands that can be seen in European museums which are specifically identified as Métis), or the 'flower people' as they are also known because of the use of flower designs in their traditional arts and crafts:

We have lots of cultural artefacts that we can strongly pronounce as Métis artefacts.... I remember when I was a boy, my mother making *les tapis* — carpets. ...my father would put a cloth of burlap [framed by] four pieces of wood and string it together. Then my mother would sit there for maybe 6 to 8 hours creating this. But she'd first draw the flowers and the leaves.... And we'd have that on our doorstep. And that's the culture, I believe, that should be carried on. A lot of people speak about culture, community culture and everything else. But we have a visible culture!

Next he told the group a story of how the sash was used as a symbol for the Festival des Voyageurs in 1967 and, as a result, many people mistake the Métis sash for the voyageurs'. As a result he has developed a new sash that was recently accepted by the Manitoba Métis Federation.

The new sash is multi-coloured and contains several symbolic colours:

The new sash colour represents the following: red is the traditional colour of the Métis sash. Blue and white symbolize the colour of the Métis nation flag, a flag with a blue background and a white infinity symbol. Green symbolizes fertility, growth and prosperity for the new Métis nation. And black symbolizes the dark period in which the Métis people had endured dispossession and repression by the oppressive Canadian government of Sir John A. Macdonald after 1870.

This man showed great pride in his involvement with the cultural resurgence of the Métis nation.

Throughout the second day of the group he sat with a traditional hat and sash lying on the table in front of him.

Other core elements of Métis cultural identity mentioned on the first day included oral traditions of philosophy and history; role models; hospitality; bannock; arts and crafts; folklore; common history of oppression by law, family, society; and values of pride, independence, survival, support, nurturance, acceptance, challenge, competition and sharing.

The Past: Significant Events, Experiences, People, Places

The people in this Métis group expressed bitterness and frustration when speaking about the past and its impact on their identity. When they tried to explain their resentment at the mainstream society they spoke about the distortion of history and the way elements of the Métis tradition have been appropriated. Often it was an emotional subject to speak about and some participants felt that the historical suppression and genocide of the Métis deserved stronger language, for example:

But we also experienced some very serious crimes. I mean it wasn't just deprivation and denial. Things like putting bounties on people's family's heads. And...legislation to outright remove us! It was quite serious! I think we're looking for stronger terms than just, for me, deprivation and denial just doesn't say it. It's quite serious. And if the history was ever truly portrayed through a Métis' eyes...it would be...something quite serious to a whole civilization that is being wiped out — literally...

Why it's hard for anyone to explain is because the atrocities go back how many centuries? Literally decades and generations of people...and if you accept it, you keep accepting it, nothing will change! So it's hard to put it into words if you don't want to [get very depressing]...it's generations of frustration. If you are a Métis and you ask — and I ask and every time I hit a wall — why? what happened here?

The group was noticeably tense throughout this passage, people were staring into space, seemingly deep in thought about this theme. The members of the circle stated that the crimes

were committed by the government of the day, the church, the Hudson's Bay Company and anyone else who wanted to be part of the process — were perpetrated as recently as fifty years ago. Throughout the discussion of the past the group continually focused on the distortion of truth and the history of the Métis nation:

There was at one time a nation here — a majority. And it's not a question so much of deprived or denied, it's more of distortion.... A lot of distorted truths about this Métis nation. It's too broad to go into in one morning...religion got involved and laws got involved...it actually got so bad at points in Manitoba's history where it divided families — entire families.

The Order of the Buffalo Hunt was a specific example of the cultural appropriation from the Métis nation. The award originally was given by the Métis to a member of their community; today it is an award much like the Order of Canada but for the province of Manitoba. Another example mentioned in the circle was the Métis sash, used by the Festival des Voyageurs in 1967: "All of a sudden everybody identifies this sash with one thing — they borrowed it...everyone was wearing this voyageur sash and it completely...distorted...the meaning of the sash."

Then the discussion turned to the land issue and the group continued to express their feelings of indignation, disbelief and bitterness:

It's the same thing as the sash...land was the same way.... The Métis were gone on the buffalo hunt...way back there was no such thing as deeds, owning land. So we went off on the buffalo hunt and the first Canadians swooped in there and set up the land claim office and whatnot. And that's how they cheated us out of land! Another man added,

Métis were buffalo hunters, that's right. But Métis were also farmers. Métis used the land and the research we did showed how much livestock Métis people had in the Red River parishes, how many plows they had, how many acres they plowed and so on. So I think the excuse the government used was, in a sense, misleading: "Well these people aren't using the land anyway. We'll put some people on it that can make good use of it." Which is basically what happened.

Beyond these specific examples of how events in the past have had a very negative effect on the identity of the Métis people, the group members were able to identify, in general, the way the history is portrayed as a starting point for resolving these issues today.

We know that that history is not accurate. So if we keep teaching that history in our schools we know we're teaching our children something that isn't accurate. That's why I think institutions like the Gabriel Dumont and the Louis Riel Institute that's starting to make inroads, at least in the curriculum part, I think is important...to enhance the culture.

While the new initiatives in research and curriculum development were positive, there was also an expression of regret that something could not have been done sooner to change the

way the information was spread to the younger generations. This man shared how others have struggled before them with the same issue:

My grandfather explained it as if we just sat on this [information] then something else is going to come along and occupy. So a lot of fault or blame or whatever you want to call it...is on the Métis ourselves. For not being there. And it's hard to use the word blame because the door was shut anyway. So even if there were Métis isolated who would stand up and say, "Wait a minute...we don't have to teach Ukraine in school. We have something here we could learn." But there was nobody there to [challenge it].

Importantly, the Métis nation has relied, for their perspective on the past, in large part, on oral accounts of history that have not been recognized by mainstream institutions. Unfortunately many of the oral accounts have not been documented and some Métis people fear that their stories could be skewed and bits of information lost. For example, the group shared many stories from their parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and other elders about being taken off their land and the Riel execution. At the time of these events anyone who was perceived to be involved with or trying to document the history could face persecution, as an individual or as a family. As a result, the oral tradition was also a matter of survival. Still, participants in the circle were aware of the way oral records are devalued in mainstream society. This man was able to articulate how this lack of respect has affected his life:

Hopefully people accept what we're telling them. A lot of people say, "Where's the proof?" Well, "Where's your proof?" — saying who's right?...a lot of people go by documentation. When I was going to school people would say, "It's written here right in the books." And I'd say, "Well that's not what my father told me or my grandfather didn't say that's right." And I'm going by...word of mouth. And then my father would tell me to just believe what they said at school. He wanted me to finish school so I had to go by what they were saying.

This passage is a good example of how a marginalized minority is forced to cope with the demands of a dominant society in order to gain access to power within that larger society. Though this group was able to articulate the source of their frustration and cultural suppression from the past, they were also aware of the changes they needed to make in the present — even though changing the course of history is sometimes a daunting task or, more appropriately, a battle, as this last passage states:

Another example is the pardon of Louis Riel. We didn't ask for a pardon, we asked for total exoneration! And it's just those types of things that we are continually faced with all the time. It's a continual survival, an ongoing battle.

Barriers: Cultural Identity Denied, Diminished or Weakened

When the facilitator turned the conversation to the present-day barriers that the participants of the circle felt diminished or denied their Métis identity, the group spoke volumes about the phenomenon of "brownwashing" through "pan-Aboriginal organizations". This speaker clarified the concept:

...they try to round up a bunch of brown faces and make them all the same...a form of subtle assimilation. Trying to say you're nothing different than the rest of us, putting together non-status, off-reserve Indians and Métis and making it sound like we are all a part of one cultural identity, one cultural group — and we're not! There are some people that are a little bit confused about their identity or maybe aren't as strong in their sense of community and feel that maybe this is the way to belong to an Aboriginal group. And they go off with these pan-Aboriginal organizations...and sort of lose their identity. I know a lot of people that are having a hard time with their cultural identity, being Métis, and not being with a lot of people who are Métis, experiencing that and knowing how it feels. So they go off and get into First Nations religions or whatever and believe that's Métis. That is part of the problem with pan-Aboriginal organizations, they confuse people. People who maybe don't have the supports or strength in the city, or family supports or whatever.

The issue of pan-Aboriginal organizations came up often throughout the course of the Métis discussion, and it is a phenomenon that these people feel surfaces in a variety of settings within their community, for example, justice, the friendship centre, the non-Aboriginal government and in service delivery.

And it is sort of like victimization...we do see a lot of it. Particularly within the justice institutions, when people go through the penitentiaries or when they go through alcoholism foundation...in these healing processes that have been established in these institutions...they get really confused because they come out and they're practising other cultural sacred practices and then questioning...why the rest of us are not. Why we're not all wearing long braids, and doing sweetgrass and...sitting in circles and doing the AA introduction.... It's really hard to deal with, particularly if it is family because you don't want to say, "You're falling on the wayside." or "That's not your identity." You don't really want to correct them because that's not our way. You have to respect their choice. But it does cause problems in our communities.

And even...the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre...when we have a rally at the legislature, the first thing the president of the board said was, "Do we have a drum group?" He didn't say, "Do we have any fiddlers or jiggers?", he said, "Do we have a drum group?" [laughs] — automatically!

I think the other point...government bureaucrats...seem to prefer to work with pan-Aboriginal organizations because it is one stop and it is neat and tidy. They don't have to take the energy to get to know the differences between Métis and the various First Nations.... It doesn't help anybody except...brown

bureaucrats who are running the pan-Aboriginal groups.

Some type of mixed-up service is provided, designed to hit everybody but it ends up being a very First Nations type of service.

It's not a division. It breaks down the identity of each [Aboriginal culture involved in the organization]. It's not doing any good to the other, I believe, in the long run. That's why there is so much confusion. That's why we're sitting here today [clarifying the concept of Aboriginal identity]!

The Métis group were the first people to raise this issue. In many respects their reaction to the pan-Aboriginal organizations is a statement of their determined stance on the distinctness of the Métis nation. This theme was pervasive over the two-day learning circle and was often expressed with a mixture of resentment, passion, anger and pride.

Another barrier to the full expression of their Métis identity was racism. As with other groups of Aboriginal people around the country, the Métis group felt the effects of racism in various institutions, including education, housing, the justice system, employment and religion. In fact, later in the process when the group was drawing circle representations of the Métis and mainstream communities, members joked about how the whole mainstream circle should be one big section called racism because it is so pervasive in their lives. As an example of the racism they face daily, the members of the group talked about the issue of history and examined how the history taught in the education system is a completely inaccurate portrayal of Métis heritage.

Empowerment: Cultural Identity Strengthened or Enhanced

There was no audio record of the discussion on experiences in the urban centre that strengthen Métis identity; instead, we rely on a summarized list of these aspects, recorded on flip charts during the discussion. The list included the following: the values of sharing and caring; songs, dances, music, arts, crafts, games, artists; social occasions, including Folkrama, Métis Cultural Reunion, Métis Trading Post; cultural events; guest speakers who visit schools to tell stories from the Métis cultural traditions; Métis languages; sense of community support; strong sense of family, both nuclear and extended; childbearing practices, responsibilities to teach the next generation; traditional foods; traditional clothing; role models or heroes from the Métis Nation, e.g., Louis Riel.

Two Communities: Métis and Mainstream

The following table illustrates the relationships or elements within the mainstream and Métis communities that have significantly affected the identity of the people in this learning circle.

Métis	Mainstream
family and friends (+)	racism (-)
church and religion: spiritual direction and community (+), bible (+), celebration of rites of passage, rituals (+); fostering confusion, fear, shame (-)	housing: greater choice (+), when denied because of racism and/or poverty (-)
education: feeling isolated and alone in school (-), lack of acknowledgement of Métis heritage (-); specific cultural and historical education provided in community (+)	poverty (-)
elders (+)	education/history: authentic, accurate (+); inaccurate racist, stereotypical (-)
oral tradition — stories, etc. (+)	church/religion: spiritual direction and community (+), bible (+), celebration of rites of passage, rituals (+); fostering confusion, fear, shame (-)
art, literature, poetry — creating one's own and reading the work of others (+)	justice system, courts, police (-)
music and dance (+)	music (+)
land (+)	recreation and sports: exercise (+), more variety (+); sometimes source of racism (-)
humour (+)	Manitoba Métis Federation (+)
language (+), lack of (-)	friends and family (+)
history (+)	government bureaucracies (-)
role models (+)	employment: economic independence, esteem (+); lack of access to (-)
traditional food (+)	fellow volunteers (+)
traditional clothing (+)	media: providing authentic, accurate, education (+), feeding stereotypes, misinformation and racism (-)
Manitoba Métis Federation (+)	urban neighbourhood/community: sense of place, security, belonging (+); not many Métis people (-), feeling lack of acceptance and racism (-)

drug and alcohol abuse (-)	political activists and organizations (+)
home community (+)	Métis Women of Manitoba (+)
hunting, trapping, fishing (+)	services (+)
poverty (-)	

When comparing the two community circles the group's discussion focused on the comfort they felt in each of the communities and their attempts to create a balance between the two. For some, the Métis circle is undoubtedly where they feel the most comfort, as with this woman:

The Métis circle is much bigger. And throughout my life experiences I have always been tested to make a choice -I've always chosen clearly which one it is I wanted. So as I've become older I realize that that part of the identity question becomes clearer in the different situations you find yourself in — even within the mainstream.

Other speakers echoed what this woman said about how, as they age and mature, their identity issues become clearer. Some people stated a preference for their Métis community even though they felt more of an impact by the mainstream culture. The group thought that there was sometimes confusion about exactly what Métis culture is.

In the Métis side a big part of my cultural identity comes from my family, the history, the music and the traditional values. I have a problem...regarding the traditional values because I am in the dark, sort of, on that. Because some people who continue to practise...are mixing up traditions and they are practising them and they don't even know why and they are confusing me. I don't even know if I could put labels on them... I can in some traditional values of the Métis but a lot of them are lost. They are not practised anymore or they are just a history note.... Probably mainstream society had more of an impact on me due to the fact I was forced into it... when I left home I came to the urban area and there it's every man for himself... [I was forced into it] for lack of anything else!...[for example] expanding in music — you can only go so far in your community, and that would be it. Sports would be the same thing. It all involves culture, your culture, or your identity...That would be the only reason I say forced into [the mainstream] because of the limitations in the Métis circle — where part of my life is concerned.... it would be like flying around in a smaller cage. But just as strong!

In this passage the speaker emphasized the limitations within the Métis community for his growth; later he added to the "bird in a cage" metaphor to talk about his experience of the mainstream:

I feel I can get lost in the larger circle [mainstream]. And the smaller circle [Métis community] I'm freer to make a stronger impact — I think we all are. In whatever we choose, like music, teaching...I feel like a smaller bird in a big cage in the

mainstream society than I would in Métis. But I think I learn more about myself in the big circle — it reflects more, there is more to reflect on.

Another man talked about the confusion people feel about Métis culture, but he also alluded to the fact that Métis people do not have to answer to or convince anyone of their ancestry. In this excerpt he looks at the desperation some people feel when they try to re-establish ties to their cultural community and heritage; he also uses the Catholic church as an example from his own life of why it was so important to learn about his Métis identity:

...traditional values and beliefs, people mixing things and not knowing what to believe in! It's like a constant search for something to grasp onto, something to believe in. And I did that with my culture. I sort of flipfopped when I came to the city. When I was in my home town the Roman Catholic belief was there and my father beating that into me...the Catholic schools... And then moving into the city my father still took us to church but after a while it started to occur to me — what do I need religion for? Why do I need the RC beliefs? I don't need that. All the wrong reasons start coming out for me to keep believing in the RC. And then I started learning about my own culture and felt that maybe this is something I can believe in. This is something I can grab onto. This is something I can feel proud of. And that was a turning point in my life is when I started believing in my culture. Having something I could grab onto. Something almost tangible. Something to replace that fear. I didn't have the fear anymore. In the Roman Catholic belief that fear of God is put into you — pounded into you. In my culture I didn't have anything to fear. And I was proud. So people are constantly looking for something to hold onto. I'm not necessarily saying it is a crutch, something to lean against, but we're always looking for something.

Though loyal to their Métis identity and the relationships they have to their community and their sense of tradition, as urban Métis people they still must contend with the daily needs of surviving: making a living, interacting with people from the mainstream, buying food, paying bills. Many of the group members shared their impressions of how they balance their need to assert their Métis identity with the demands of a surrounding dominant society that, in large part, does not support their Aboriginal identity. For some speakers, the task was arduous — "For me it's hard to balance the two. Because they are too separate. I have to explain one or the other to [different people]. So for me there is no balance."

Bi-cultural families and relationships often become a microcosm for the issues that arise between the two communities; here the cultural balancing act must take place on a smaller, more intimate, level. Sometimes the relationship is a healthy one that supports growth of identity; for example one fellow told the group that

When I discuss cultural identity with my girlfriend, she's not Métis...she's caucasian. She thinks of me as a potential leader in the Métis community and

someone who is going to lend a strong voice in the Métis culture. That's the way she looks at me. So I start to think that way... that's why my circle was really strong on the Métis side; because I'm more involved in that community than I am in the mainstream community. A lot more involved.

Another man shared his own experience on the same theme:

Balancing, for me, is a personal thing — how you feel at the time. Especially if you have children — my wife is Ukrainian and my son, and you have to deal with that. That's society too. So you have to have a balance there in order to keep your child in perspective to his culture. Like he's having a hard time now weighing out whether he should be Métis or Ukrainian. He's more so into my culture than my wife's culture. And he's comfortable with that. But as he gets older he might lose the balance until he has to deal with it. But I think it's all a personal thing that you have to deal with. You have to balance it out eventually in order to survive.... We haven't forced anything on my son, it's just that he has more fun because of my involvement with the community and he sees that. And my spouse, she has no involvement with her cultural community. He sees that I'm actively involved and he likes to participate. Being as young as he is he enjoys it. And he enjoys identifying himself as my culture. And as he gets older he might identify himself with the other culture. He knows what he is and what he wants to do — we don't force anything on him.

Though this man was able to express his cultural identity freely within his family, others were not. Members of the Métis circle often alluded to family secrets about having Métis heritage or spoke about how they finally admitted their Métis identity. Another man told the group about the situation in his life; he was married to a woman who was 'treaty', and his ex-wife and her family now want his son to identify himself only as a treaty person. The man favoured exposing his son to both cultures so the boy could choose at a later date, but the mother, who had custody of the boy, felt that she should choose his cultural identity for him. In the end the whole area of culture and identity is an issue of great stress in this family. The same man identified some important sources of the tensions he feels both from the mainstream and within the Métis community,

Yup! There's a conflict. The mainstream doesn't really accept who we are trying to be. They're trying to tell us who we are. Within a Métis circle we know who we are. We don't have to prove it to anybody else. But, there is also a conflict within the Métis community too because sometimes you have to prove yourself within the Métis people themselves. If you're not accepted by them they'll keep ignoring you no matter how loud you speak. But mainstream is more conflicting toward all the Métis in general because they're telling us who we are and what we should be like.

Still other speakers identified their ability to survive, to adapt to the mainstream community as central to their strength as a Métis person. This man couched his thoughts in a

historical context:

I approach things from a historical perspective.... As Métis people...having to tolerate and put up with and adapt to the invasion of us by the first Canadians who came here with the money and did all the things that they did. The Métis didn't make it their problem about who they were, I don't think. And that's what I do today. I don't make it my problem. I don't make it a problem about who I am. I don't have to answer to somebody...the mainstream society. I don't have to answer to them. I just tolerate them, put up with them. They're the dominant society. They have the money. If you work for the government, that's the hand that feeds you. But, I mean you can't go around kissing ass either. You just adapt and make it what you want it to be. It's like life, like anything else. It's not a battle for me; I guess that's what I'm trying to say. I try to balance it from day to day but I don't make it a battle. I don't go out there looking for trouble. I don't go out into mainstream society and say, "Listen!"...I just don't make it a battle.

Clearly there is an identifiable set of survival skills that the people speaking in the circle felt the need to develop. Though this man stated he doesn't "make it a battle", later in the discussion he told the group how he promotes the Métis culture to the mainstream in more positive ways:

I tried to go into the mainstream society and do positive things. For example, I facilitate a Métis cultural workshop. I go to schools and do lectures. And through my music, I perform not only in the Métis community but also in mainstream society. And I still do the songs that pertain to the Métis culture. So I'm sort of promoting all the time, the Métis nation.

In many respects, educating both the mainstream and Métis communities with accurate information is one of the most vital efforts of social change expressed by many of the learning circles around the country. The discussion and recommendations of the Manitoba Métis group echoed this concern.

Recommendations

We, the Métis people, recommend:

1. We be given the right of self-government and self-determination with the required legislative authority to exercise control over our own destiny, for example, lands, education, natural resources, employment, health, housing, economic development, family services and child advocacy services.
2. That equitable and swift settlements be reached with respect to outstanding land claims issues.
3. The development and implementation of culturally relevant resources and curriculum with historically accurate information of the Métis people be developed by Métis people

and used at all levels of education.

4. The establishment of an Educational and Cultural Development Resource Centre on Métis people. The resource centre would collect, house and network accurate historical information for public use and education.
5. That the Métis flag be flown at every school in Métis communities.
6. The establishment of a enumeration process and comprehensive data base of the Métis people to ensure proper identification.
7. The establishment of a Métis Cultural Centre in urban settings to address the needs and concerns of urban Métis people.

Conclusion

Much of the discussion in the Métis circle derived from the participants' need to state the cultural distinctiveness of the Métis nation. Throughout the learning circle the group expressed immense pride for their Métis identity. They also spoke with passion, conviction and, often, with bitterness about attempts to minimize their uniqueness or to group them with other Aboriginal cultures. Clearly, this community has, historically, learned that they must protect the integrity of their identity from the threats of suppression and destruction through the various tactics of assimilation policies.

The loss of data from day one was extremely unfortunate as this group of people often spoke articulately and with great zeal about the issues raised by the facilitator. A potentially rich body of information was inaccessible for inclusion in this document.

Appendix 3 — Descriptive Analysis of the Winnipeg Inmates Learning Circle

The twelve men who took part in this learning circle were from the Native Brotherhood Organization of the Stoney Mountain Penitentiary just outside Winnipeg. Their ages ranged from 22 to 47, and they were from the following nations: Anishnabe (Ojibwa), Cree, Métis and Saulteaux.

The men in the circle began by stating their apprehensions about speaking to the Royal Commission before they understood exactly how the information would be used. They also were sceptical that the research project could produce any noticeable change in the lives of Aboriginal people, considering how many major research reports simply ended up collecting dust on the bookshelves of bureaucrats and academics. This discussion went on for approximately an hour and a half, with the facilitators answering concerns and committing themselves to representing the information with the greatest of integrity and doing their best to make sure the report does have some impact. An important point made by one facilitator was that the only impact she could truly guarantee from the project was that it represented the beginning of a process for developing awareness of cultural identity. If nothing else the learning circle could help the men begin to express, together and as individuals, what they felt was fundamental to their identity as Aboriginal men.

An important transition in the initial discussion came about shortly after one of the men expressed why he felt it was important to tell their story to the Royal Commission, which represents the non-Aboriginal population,

...newspapers, television...the crisis in Oka and the Mercier Bridge...what happened with Elijah Harper and the Meech Lake Accord — all these things that have been happening have created somewhat of a cultural explosion with our people. A lot of our people never really understood what a pipe was about and all these other things — the four directions. Or even how to approach an elder — you give tobacco to an elder to talk to them. People didn't understand these things until just recently. They're starting to understand that we have a culture, I guess during the last five years. A lot of people are starting to discover what it actually means to be Anishnabe or Cree or whatever, whatever their nation is. I guess for myself I've always known that I was Anishnabe. I've always been in conflict with the larger society because of my different values, my different traditions. And I think this is what has brought a lot of brothers into the prison: living self-government. They couldn't wait for the government to give us self-government so they just went out and started living it. And a lot of those that are in jail now, this is the first time they have ever sat in a circle and shared a

pipe, or gone to a sweat. This is where they're starting to learn different aspects of their culture — having an Anishnabe name, your own spiritual name. This is where they're learning about their culture. I think for the longest time our people were embarrassed or ashamed of being Anishnabe or being Native people in Canada because there was such a negative connotation on Native people: they were all drunks, thieves and welfare recipients and this and that.... So it's important for us to talk about these things and the things that concern us. Otherwise they [non-Aboriginal people/government] don't know us, they don't understand about our culture because it is so foreign to them. They can't understand anything about the spirituality, these people have lost touch with their spirits and that's why our society is the way it is now. It's important for them to understand what we as Native people have gone through — at their hands. It's important for us to explain to them. We have nothing to be afraid of.... it provides a lot of strength for others who have survived all kinds of disasters, catastrophes. These people made our culture a crime! To practise our ceremonies it was a crime. They wiped out entire nations of Aboriginal people when they came here. They wanted to take us right off the land so that they could have it. But our people survived. And I think it's because of our culture. Our culture taught us to be survivors.... I mean 500 years these people have lived on this Turtle Island and what has happened to our Native people while they've been here, while they were occupying our lands? These are the effects they've had on us: our suicide rate is higher than theirs, the rate of our babies surviving is lower than theirs, our life expectancy is lower than theirs. Why is this?

This man also reassured the group that they were under no obligation to say anything and that they could leave if they still felt as though they did not want to share their personal story. Soon after these reassurances and much discussion the group was ready to begin.

Still, earlier in the day, while the men were talking about their Aboriginal identity the room had a certain reserved tension, likely owing in part to their feelings of uncertainty and initial lack of trust for the work of the Commission. As the day went on there was a noticeable drop in tension in the room, and participants were able to express themselves more freely. Even with these barriers the men clearly had a lot to say about these issues and eventually became highly involved in the process.

The Present: Core Elements of Cultural Identity

When discussing the present state of their cultural identity the men in the inmate group expressed feelings that included bitterness, anger, hurt, confusion, disillusionment and frustration. Many of these feelings seemed to stem from the fact that they yearned to develop their Aboriginal identity through practice and additional learning but they felt heavily constrained by the prison administration. Further, many were in the process of learning the historical roots of colonialism

and the devastating effects it has had on Aboriginal people for generations — this knowledge inspired a thinly veiled rage in some of the men. More than one man drew parallels between the struggle they endure to practise their Aboriginal heritage within the prison and the long-term suppression of Aboriginal cultures by the Canadian government and various other mainstream institutions. It was no secret that almost 60 per cent of the prison population was of Aboriginal ancestry and the men stated that the projections for the future were a dramatic increase in this percentage. (Note: The subject of the justice system, including prisons, is examined with greater depth in the main body of the report.) The conflict of value systems they felt with regard to mainstream society and the tension that resulted was also a core identity issue for many of the participants. Some expressed their struggle in terms of always trying to find some kind of balance between the two cultures in a way that allowed them to maintain their sense of self-respect and integrity. One man stated, "I'm trying to find a way to feel comfortable with my existence — as a human being, as one of the people."

For many men part of their sense of Aboriginal identity entailed a process of spiritual reawakening — shedding old, non-Aboriginal, religious paradigms in favour of the spiritual teachings from their own traditions. As part of this process of personal spiritual growth the men longed for greater access to their elders and they sought out opportunities to learn about important medicines — sage, cedar, sweetgrass, feathers — and take part in various traditional activities — sweatlodge, pipe, purification, prayer, sacred circles. Within the prison, because the men came from different nations, it was also a struggle to gain access to resources that were specific to individual Aboriginal cultures represented in the prison population; instead, the approach to service delivery seemed to be a homogenization of all the Aboriginal nations. Another central part of the identity of many speakers was the fundamental value and appreciation for Mother Earth. The men also expressed the importance of one's family, of living in harmony with nature and other people and of the balance between mind, body and spirit that is the goal of healing.

The Past: Significant Events, People, Programs, Experiences

With respect to events from the past, speakers focused on the historical roots of the conflict of cultures that began when the first Europeans met with the Aboriginal ancestors of the men in this circle, marking the onset of colonization. This man spoke about the methods of cultural

suppression that he perceived and experienced in his own life:

I think we've been denied our culture pretty well since the Europeans met us. Because people long ago had to do raindances and sundances in secret. So people wouldn't know, so they wouldn't get caught doing their thing. Then when I was in boarding school I was denied my culture there; I used to get whippings, you know, brutality. And I'll never forget those lickings. Only for speaking my own Native tongue.... It's a struggle for Native people all along. I just hope one day we will be recognized as a people; right now we're on the sidelines. We're being pushed around by the government. If there is no law against anything, they make up a law.... Every time we get a little strong they do something else. They are using money now to keep us under control...

Here is another historical and political analysis:

This didn't just happen. When I was born, 28 years ago, at that time slavery was still very much in existence in the U.S. In the last few years I've applied myself to try to learn something — culturally and otherwise. And what I learned was that, the situation we are in today is largely responsible [a result of] the policies the government has enacted. The best way to describe it is to use this institution to say how I feel. I feel very trapped. I'm institutionalized. But it can't be any more different than what our old people have gone through because shortly after Confederation the *Indian Act* came to life...our people were not allowed to leave the reservation, they had to have a pass. Secondly, they couldn't practise their culture. Thirdly, they couldn't form an organization to speak on their behalf. Lawyers were banned from acting on behalf of Native people. Shortly after creating the reservation they used starvation as a means of getting the people to enter into treaty. You have to understand that slavery was still very much a part of government policy. The origin of the government was in England. There was a lot of hatred, a lot of discrimination. There was no credit given to our people. Before they came here 500 years ago we had a complex society and we existed here for a long time. And we had our own institutions of law, the way our elders taught us to be, what it was to be an Indian. These societies existed long before these people came over here. And everything they brought was imported, including the religion. The important thing about religion when the French came up the St. Lawrence...they claimed that because our people did not pray to Christ...they had no claim to land. If you weren't a Christian or a Catholic, you had no rights whatsoever. And today...people forget that underlying these policies they have today is a lot of discrimination. So the origin of our social stress today is not so much us but it is more to do with the government...

My grandfather died not too long ago, and one of the things he taught me to do was — not only to learn about the pipe and the sweatlodge — but he gave me a reading, an excerpt from the Royal Proclamation. And this is what he wrote: "In 1763 the British imperial power began an inauguration of a campaign to legislate Native cultures out of existence." And the *Indian Act* is nothing short of that. And it's fulfilling all those things that they intended at the beginning. And we think we have rights today guys — we don't! We are wards of the government. We are subjects of the Crown, the Queen, as they call her. The rights we have today will

be eventually gone. There is no guarantee. We think we have treaty rights, the government, these people are trained so well that we're not going to have anything. It was expected of us that we would leave our culture behind and become normal Canadians. That was their intention and it still is today. So my beef is with the *Indian Act*, the government. They've oppressed us in every way, shape and form. They've done everything. They killed a lot of our people to begin with. They took advantage of us — literally! And today, the guys in prison, the ladies in prison, our youth centres are filled! Ninety per cent of them are Indians in Winnipeg! The projection is that in a couple of years this place is going to be 90 per cent [Aboriginal men].

Throughout the history of colonization there have been many institutions used by the government to aid in the assimilationist agenda: the residential schools, the child welfare system, youth detention centres and the prisons have been identified as the most potent weapons in this campaign. All of the men in the circle had been through at least two of these institutions; for example, many of the men began their institutional life under the care of the child welfare system in foster placement with non-Aboriginal families, in a residential school, in a youth centre or in a provincial jail. In the midst of discussing this universal pattern in their lives one of the participants noted the following:

It almost seems like, with all the things we've been through, we've all been prepared for the eventual fate of being here. It's all been directed to one thing. And that's still a form of genocide.

When the men realized how they have all been through so many institutions and the effects it had on their identity there was a profound silence as they seemed to be contemplating what this information meant to their own lives and to Aboriginal people in general.

This man spoke of his reaction to his many foster placements in non-Aboriginal families:

I also was taken away from my family when I was pretty young but I dealt with it in a different way; mine was more of an attitude. And how discipline was taken care of on the reserve, which was practically nil other than the silent treatment which, later on was the worst possible form of punishment that could be dealt out back home. When you got to the mainstream society it was a whole different thing: things were taken away, you were beat, you were reprimanded verbally. It was something totally alien. And I learned to fight when I was a kid; when they first raised the belt, they got me in the room and that was the only time they ever got me. After that I started learning how to run — real fast! And I kept on running. I went through, in a period of six years, about 14 foster homes, because some of these people I would attack — especially kids. They would do the same bad thing that I would do and punishment wasn't dealt out so I would give them my own form of punishment. I don't know, I would always like to see myself as a person that fought.

The sense of rebellion and the history of running is something other men who had

experienced foster care could identify with. Here is a similar sentiment to the one above:

When I was young I was put in a foster home. But I didn't like it there, I knew what these people were trying to do wasn't right, being raised the way I was. The first time I ran away I was nine years old. After that I went to homes that I chose — relatives, family — I was constantly on the run.

The oldest man in the group talked about the abuse Aboriginal children, including himself, suffered at the residential schools and the effects he still feels in his life today:

I was brought up by my grandparents too. My mom died when I was six...I was taught the Native way when I was a young kid. They taught me about the four directions and all that. Then when I was about nine years old, that's when the government took us to boarding school — against my parents' will! Forced us! So I ended up in Brandon school. That's where there was a lot of abuse to children. The staff used to abuse them, physical abuse and sexual abuse, emotional abuse. That's where you got to learn how to hate, eh? There wasn't enough to eat there. They even gave you a hell of a licking, and not a spanking, a licking, for talking your own language. Or just for the pleasure of it. I've been trying to forget about that past, eh? Trying to forgive. I have bad feelings some times.

The subject of residential schools came up often. The following speakers shared with the group how they felt the schools, with the help of the churches, affected their families and communities:

The residential schools played a key role in [the colonization process]; the language was lost, the culture was lost, a sense of pride...so a whole series of things went along with the way our culture was denied. And even our own people denied our culture because they actually believed it was evil! My auntie is a good example of that. My grandfather passed away and the singers want to sing a song but my auntie denied that. She really spiritually believed that was evil. So the residential schools more or less brainwashed our people into believing that our culture was evil, and that it was bad and no good. The generations that were involved in the residential schools had an important effect on how we lived — the younger generation. That effect is still ongoing to this very day. Here is another example of the same dynamic:

A lot of Manitoba communities are assimilated into Christian thought. My reserve...I don't recall any pow wows there and a lot of people are church-going kind of people. My father died in 1985 and I attended his funeral. I tried to have a braid of sweetgrass and a feather put in his hand but my family — from his side of the family — was shocked that I would do such a thing. A fight almost broke out because I tried to do that. I was so hurt but at the same time wanted to respect their wishes...at that time many of us were moving toward cultural identity but at the same time it wasn't mainstream yet so people were still denying they were First Nation people. So at my father's funeral a fight almost broke out because I wanted to have a feather and a braid of sweetgrass with him — that's crazy to me! So I've asked my family: "When was the last time there were ceremonies there?" There has been ceremonies but they have been underground. My grandmother

was a medicine woman, she lived in the woods and we used to visit there. She didn't want anything to do with modern society; she lived in a shack that she had built for herself and basically just moved away and became like a hermit in a sense, and just practised her culture. But the rest of the people thought she was a bad woman because she practised Native spirituality. So it's kind of confused but there's no pow wows there. People were kind of denying the existence of pow wows or even culture. I grew up in a community where I knew something was wrong so when I moved into the city at a very young age there was nothing there, no culture. So I grew up in the city being a rebel and a First Nations man but at the same time, not really knowing my real roots. So I think there's a lot of people in the city, Winnipeg for example, my friends, they don't know who they are as people. And a lot of my friends here, they still don't know.

For me I've always been curious and I took the initiative myself. I've been studying for six years and I understand a bit of myself but at the same time I try to pass the information I know onto my brothers and hopefully I'll stimulate some pride in them. Hopefully they'll get some interest or try to understand themselves. For the people in the community, in Winnipeg for example, who even deny they understand their own language. I lost my language for a while and I'm just starting to pick it up again in the last six years. One of the things that was against the law for me, in the communities where I grew up, was to speak my language because the minute I spoke something I'd get a beating or something. So I was always conforming to a stereotype image, having long hair, talk the language. People would say, "Hey!" It would be better if I was a Main Street Indian. So I ended up feeling out of place. I started denying myself the language, I stopped talking and I began to learn English. Then I lost my other language. It's taken me a while to relearn some of the words...I can talk some words now but I have to use English...

A lot of guys in the city, they even hate their own sisters, because they're First Nations. They see their sisters as promiscuous women, they have an image of them as being too promiscuous for them so they go after Caucasian women because their sisters are not good enough for them. And I'm sorry to say that, and I used to think like that too. It's only been in the last couple of years that I've changed that outlook because I seen a lot of sisters getting more educated and moving on.

In the latter part of this excerpt one can see how the communities, including this young man, began to internalize some of the racism that surrounded them in the non-Aboriginal society and identify with the source of their cultural oppression. Other men in the group were able to relate similar stories from their own lives. This man's story is one example:

In later years I got ashamed of myself as a Native. So...I went after Caucasian women instead of Native. Cause I was self-conscious and ashamed to be Native. So that was a big part of my upbringing. I realized there was something wrong with being ashamed of myself and I turned back to my culture.

These last two passages focused on how the fundamental relationships of these men's lives were effected by racism. Repeatedly the group described how their identity, their families

and their communities were nearly devastated. One of the other observances about the colonization process was how religion and missionaries were used in attempts to break down Aboriginal people spiritually first:

I think what made it easier for the government to suppress my people was denying us our way of life like the ways we worship the Creator. It made it easier for them to justify a lot of the things they had done to try to take away the spirit of the people. But individually that spirit is still here. That's what I find about the culture here. I am awakened to a lot of things about my spirit. It's making me stronger and that's what my people need; every one of us need that kind of contact with the Creator. You can't sever that; each human being needs that. I think that's what the government tried to do, they tried to weaken us in that way.

This man focused on how, as part of the spiritual crusade, the central role of elders in the communities began to erode:

I think one of the most important things I'd like to mention is that the roles of elders was completely dissolved. Their teachings, their decision making, all that was taken away from them. They were made to feel useless. They were just there to grow old and die.... Through residential schools, we weren't allowed to speak our language, not allowed to practise our culture. It was taboo to practise any of these things. That was made clear to elders too. They weren't allowed to have their kids come to the schools and practise these things.

The media were another force that some of the men felt had an impact on their identity in their youth. One fellow who remembers spending a lot of time alone because he rarely experienced a feeling of belonging said he watched a lot of television:

My biggest influence was TV — that's what made me ashamed of being Indian. Watching Indians being killed in western movies all the time and not being accepted anywhere had a very serious impact as to who I wanted to be and what I wanted to be. So I had a lot of negative thoughts and a lot of resentment... Additionally, this man stated that he learned from television that violence and hatred were glamorous and effective sources of power.

Another man in the group remembered some positive things that he saw on television in his youth; one time he saw Buffy St. Marie dressed in traditional garb speaking about Aboriginal issues. He said he felt very proud, that the event really moved him because it was in the 1970s and at the time it was rare for him to see a successful role model in the public domain. The same man told the group how the movie "Crazy Horse" also inspired him:

Something about this movie really inspired me...you know how Hollywood always portrayed us as the bad guys, but somehow even then as a child I knew we weren't bad. That there was something wrong in this movie that wasn't being portrayed right. After seeing Crazy Horse I used to look at the clouds and try to see his face and imagine seeing his face.... I used to actually believe that he was

there watching me.... That was a turning point for me to start getting involved as a First Nations person and trying to understand myself.

Substance abuse, said one of the speakers, was an expression of the following dynamic in

Aboriginal communities:

...once our culture was taken away...I think people became disillusioned and felt helpless and hopeless. So I think when someone is down and out they become self-destructive.

Most of these men spoke about substance abuse touching their lives in some capacity; if it wasn't their own abuse of recovery it was a close family member or another significant person in their lives. One of the men told the group how he came from a reserve community with an extremely high rate of substance abuse and poverty. Though his community recently underwent a highly effective recovery program, in his youth this was not the case. At that time he had an interest in dancing at pow wows and other traditional cultural events but these things were non-existent on his reserve. Here is a segment of his story about how he became a traditional dancer, a part of his identity that strengthens him daily by providing him with a sense of purpose and hope:

When I was younger growing up, on our reserve, we never had no sweats, no round dances, no pipe ceremonies. Basically everybody was into drugs and alcohol. It was a sad fact but that was the case on our reserve. So to some extent that denied my culture...and the only way that I was able to practise my culture was to go outside my reserve into neighbouring reserves who practised the culture that I was interested in. In some ways maybe that's why I started drinking at such a young age because I couldn't be involved with the Native culture as much as I wanted to be. As we were from a pretty poor community so travelling to other reserves became a problem at times. So that made it that much harder to practise the culture. And one of the things that I was really interested in back then was pow wows. We were too poor to make outfits and stuff like that so as kids we just went and danced with our clothes...and that was a gratifying experience for us. I don't think I really needed an outfit to dance I just liked doing it.

And one of the most rewarding experiences I can remember was at a pow wow in...Saskatchewan.... I was dancing, mimicking the other dancers, and the announcer of the pow wow called me up and awarded me \$5! In 1968 that was a lot of money for me. And just being acknowledged was gratifying for me. It made a lasting impression on me and in later years gave me more incentive to learn about my culture — like I said I had to go outside my reserve to practise that. So I was denied my culture in that respect. But in years to come it was a lot easier for me knowing other people did have sweats, sundances, raindances and whichever kind of ceremonies you wish to participate in.

My grandfather and I used to go on long drives to other reserves where they had hand game tournaments. I didn't understand the game, all the pointing

gestures and how the game was played. As years went on I started participating in the tournaments. How I did that was I went to a pow wow and I didn't have a penny in my pocket — just some paints. So my dad didn't have any cigarettes and I was feeling bad for him because he liked to smoke cigarettes so I took my paints and went over to the hand game players and asked if anybody wanted their drum painted and they said yes so I painted some drum for five dollars a drum. At the end of the three days I came away with pretty close to \$500 just for painting these drums! And I gave my dad the majority of that money so he had some cigarettes. And that was spiritually uplifting for myself, knowing I could help my father; at the same time I was helping myself. So that's how I became stronger in the culture.

Later on I began to dance and to participate more, actually playing in the hand game tournaments. So I was fortunate in that respect I guess. The hand game tournaments were another part of the traditional culture that this man was proud of.

Memories from childhood with their families or communities, before they had any significant contact with the non-Aboriginal society, were commonly shared by the men. It seemed as though many viewed this period as the foundation of their Aboriginal identity, a base to return to and guide them throughout their lives. This man is one example:

When I was small I used to go to the these dances, sundances or whatever you call them. I've seen old men, like elders, do stuff that non-Aboriginals wouldn't believe. That's where I started to believe in my spirituality because I'd seen these events happen. They weren't tricks or anything...I've seen stuff that old fellas did long ago. That's how come I believe in the Great Spirit.... We might think we're alone sometimes, but we're not. Things happen to me, like spiritually, about four times in my life it happened to me. So this is why I believe.

Though not all of the men had experiences such as this man, many could remember a time when they lived with a grandparent or other family member who taught them about their traditions, took them to celebrations or perhaps showed them how to survive in nature. Most of the men had some memory from their youth that they held onto about their family or community and was central to their identity. As well, some men told stories about ancestors who were remarkable and gave them a sense of pride in their heritage. For example, one man spoke about his grandfather who operated a shake tent, another man told of his grandmother who was a medicine woman — both felt inspired to learn more about their ancestors because of the knowledge they had of their grandparents' lives.

Some of the other experiences from their past that the men shared as significant to their identity included a reawakening of their traditional spirituality; experiences of racism; the event of the crime they were serving time for; the transition to living in the urban centre; political

organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs or the Winnipeg First Nations Tribal Council; spiritual organizations such as the North American Native Church; and family tragedies.

Barriers: Aspects of Cultural Identity Denied or Deprived

Though it has been an important place to begin to learn about their Aboriginal heritage (owing in large part to the Native Brotherhood Organization and their relationships with other Aboriginal inmates within the institution), the prison setting itself was a fundamental barrier to the full expression of identity that all of the men raised. The limitations within the institution were among the most talked about issues of the two-day circle because they touched on every aspect of the men's lives starting with the healing process in which most felt they were trying to be engaged:

Our way of life is not given to us or respected, the way we understand it. Only on hearsay from the administration's point of view. Now, in itself, within this institution, that's a catch-22 because we are not allowed to function as people — as a whole! It's only a superficial: "You can have this little amount, and this little amount." So the whole healing process...it's not mendful. With a population of 200-250 we are only allowed so many sweats a year. And you can only fit so many people in that sweat so it's not really compatible with the number of sweats. So, wholeheartedly, we're not allowed to go the full nine yards to reach that healing process that we need in the prison setting. As of late we're starting to get more support from the community and people are starting to wonder why, with a population as high as this, we're not allowed to practise the way we live. And that's the foundation of who we are. It's the only way we can heal ourselves: by the traditional ways, by the sweats, by the lodges...by compatible people in each group. He's Saulteaux, I'm Cree...there's different walks of life in here. It's gotta be met by the administration.

Now, concerning the administration, we're just gradually starting to make movement, so to speak, towards that direction. I don't know, maybe in a couple of years it will be a different scenario but right now it's not being met. And that's the sad part, a lot of us in here feel like we're the pawns in a chess game and we're expendable. Because the queen — the government — makes the ultimate move. And knocks us off: the sweats, the elder, what we can practise, how we can practise it, what we keep on ourselves. It's an ongoing problem. Like this guy said, the sweats have to be met by all parties involved.

And, I've been here six years and all I've seen is the age range get younger and younger. I remember there was all 25-40 years old. Now they're coming straight from Agassiz — from a youth centre to a penitentiary! Something is not right! As human beings we have to look at the problem within ourselves but we also have to be met halfway from our elders, from our communities, from

interested parties such as yourself. And it's not being met. And the problems are just going to get worse and worse and worse. And this is going to be a warehouse for Indians. Especially for the younger generation...I think the Brotherhood is going to go in that direction, instead of the worrying about the old people we're going to try and work on the youth...

...we can't [practise our culture] because we don't know how... I can go in a sweat in January; but to be fair to my other brothers I have to give them the opportunity to go in also. Now in the healing process, you're not going to go into a sweat the one time and be healed. It takes a long time. Some times you might have to go in ten times in that sweat before you understand. And I can't without being fair to the rest of my brothers.

More on the issue of trying to heal in the prison:

We're not allowed to practise our culture to its full extent; I think we're only allowed to practise about...a tenth of it! So you talk about healing, it's a big process...these sweats here are purification sweats. Forty-nine to fifty-seven per cent of the population has a First Nations background. For some of us, we haven't had a sweat in three or four weeks now. So there are members here who are very unstable and who want a healing sweat. So it's really hard for us members when we're approached by the men to get a healing sweat happening. It's really hard to give an answer to that person...you try to help them in any way you can but unfortunately the kind of help he wants can only be given by a healer. Like the other people here have stated, you don't just get healed in one night by going to a sweat, it takes a lot of preparation.

And one of the areas we'll be talking about is the...warrior dances...here so we can all learn and heal. Because one of the things that we all feel as members here is that, I don't feel like a lot of times the culture is...it's not whole! It's almost like you're given a case of it to try to practise and get the best of it that you can. So sometimes we feel almost like you almost caught it and you couldn't fully explore the aspects of the culture: then there's a roadblock there. You start feeling good and moving towards healing. You can feel it within yourself. And then all of a sudden BANG! Something stops and nothing gets done and you're kind of in a state of limbo.

So, yeah, there's lack of spiritual practices here. They do have their rules, we understand, but I think they could try and meet us halfway. You know, try to meet us there but also, I have a beef here. We are 57 per cent of the population here; there are 519 inmates, so we have 270-280 guys for one elder! Where the Catholic and the Protestant groups who come to the church every Sunday, maybe if it's lucky they'll get 20 guys. And yet, it's entitled to full support of administration and lots of benefits like spiritual retreats and they're entitled to have this chapel area seven days a week. Where we have to make so many memos and almost...kiss boots, just to get this area [the room being used for the learning circle]. To us this is bullshit!

So I feel the frustration a lot of the members have here. We need to have more elders involved, more of our culture recognized and to be fully understood. Like I said only a tenth is allowed to be practised. Even if they meet us a quarter I'm sure that there will be movement, a real healing, from the members. We are

starting to have healing from our own sacred circle because we have taken the initiative from ourselves. Now, we've been lucky to get some very gifted people that somehow...we've been able to follow. But for some members it's really hard. I feel frustrated when an individual comes to me to ask for a healing sweat because they feel down, helpless. And I don't have an answer for him, and I feel for him because I understand what he is going through. But I present it to the elder and he has like twenty or thirty other guys so he gets bombarded with too much paper work and not enough counselling time. So we feel like, not just one or two but three elders to offset some of that caseload because for a lot of us there is a lot of problems and we try to deal with them in our circle but at the same time there's some confidentiality that isn't allowed in these circles so they can't fully express themselves.

The Stoney Mountain Penitentiary was not unlike other penal institutions. From this man's perspective,

On the street when you want to sweat you go out and look for it, you find it. People are always sweating out there. In the institution you have to make arrangements for a sweat. We are only allowed one sweat a month plus four additional special sweats — sixteen a year. There's been a number of occasions when I've been in segregation when I've requested a sweat and was rejected — I see it as a denial of my being able to participate in a sweatlodge.

For a while I was up in a special handling unit in Prince Albert and while we were there it was extremely difficult to practise the ceremonies because of their mentality. I was there for a little over a year and during that time I attempted to get a sweatlodge and this was denied me and the reason was the good order of the institution. That is what they put on paper. When I had an interview with the manager there, the reason he stated to me was they would not be able to have gun surveillance on me while I was in the sweatlodge. It's a maximum security institution. I guess one of their rules is they always maintain gun surveillance on the inmates. I was denied a sweatlodge. However after eight months of attempting to arrange something up there — I did fast when I was there and I did have my medicine bundle, we were allowed to keep our medicine bundles but we weren't allowed to replenish them. We could keep sage, cedar and we were allowed sweetgrass but these were things we weren't allowed to get in the institution. So after eight months I did finally manage to have a pipe ceremony. So that was pretty good. I guess, for the most part, the institution won't accept or recognize Native spirituality. To a certain extent they will.

We had a meeting with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs not too long ago...with the Assistant Warden of Correction Programs. He was very firm in not allowing us more than sixteen sweats a year and he was very firm in not allowing us an elders' helper. However other individuals at that meeting stated otherwise...what they were doing was illegal...freedom to practise our religion as we see fit. Hopefully that will be changing in the next little while. We'll be able to have more sweats.

The physical security of the prison is equalled administratively by the bureaucratic barriers the men feel they must overcome to practise their lifestyle; for some, there is an urge to

simply give up in the face of these constant "roadblocks". Here is an indication of what some of the participants perceived in the way of access to resources for different sectors of the prison population and the despair they feel in response to the endless bureaucratic hurdles in the institution:

The church services in this institution are fifty-two services a year. And the sweats are only limited to, sometimes, two a month, but in most cases only once a month. And it's frustrating because the amount of Natives within this institution outweighs the number of non-Natives within this institution. And yet the church has more services than the sweats. And in order to go through the healing process...it takes more than just one sweat. And if there is even a possibility that the government could look at this and implement [something that recognizes]...our sweat is a church. That's what it is because we go in there and we pray. That's what it is. It's a church. It's my opinion that the institution should recognize the sweats. We should also have fifty-two sweats a year, the same as the church here does. Because of the amount of guys here, like he [another man in the circle] just said, he can only go in the sweat once because he has to give somebody else a chance to go in the sweat...to also undergo that healing process. And that's where the frustration comes in, because of the lack of being able to participate in our culture. There's a roadblock set in front of you if you want to continue to learn our culture. Which, in the end, would better ourselves. 'Cause when we get out of here, when we get on the street, we always get confused, it's hard. When I got out the last time it was hard, I couldn't function out on the street because I was institutionalized. By living through the guidelines, and the rules and regulations and programs, sending in proposals for a sweat, putting in memos for a sweat, putting in this, putting in that...it all adds up to making you feel confused and frustrated and you just feel like saying the heck with everything. Something has to be done because we need to heal ourselves in here. That pretty well sums it up for me.

The men speaking in the inmates circle were very clear about how they were treated differently within the institution as Aboriginal men. This is apparent in their stories and in observations such as this one, which focuses on the structured inequality within the prison personnel:

I see a lot of things in here that still tell us that we're not accepted. If you look around this institution and you take a real hard serious look and you try and see how many Natives are in management areas, there is absolutely none! None! There is no Native in this institution that has a job where they have authority to make decisions for their own people. And that's sad to see. We're the majority in here and there's nobody looking after us. Sure we have our elders and if it wasn't for them this place would be chaos I'm sure. We hang onto what little we have. So in a sense we are denied our cultural identity.

The men also articulated a component of their identity as their place between two societies — Aboriginal and mainstream; in this respect they felt victimized or caught in an

immense conflict. In light of the fact that the prison is perhaps the ultimate institution of control in the mainstream culture, and these men have defied the boundaries of this culture, it is no surprise that the conversation eventually turned to the place of the prison in the larger society.

Here is one example:

I think it's not only the institution's rules that set up a roadblock for us, I think it's society's rules in general. For the simple reason that in our tradition or our society the rules that we are asked to follow are very very much stricter. We don't break those rules for the simple reason that we have an understanding of why those rules are there and we respect them. As opposed to coming to another society, to the city, it's much easier for us to break those rules because we don't understand them. And we get caught up in a system that we don't know nothing about. That's where the development starts and we don't know how to get out of it. We don't know what to do. And if we try to go back to our cultural...way, it's impossible for us to fully get the capacity of what it is we need to learn to get back on our feet. There's always them roadblocks, there's always more rules. You gotta live by two sets of rules: ours and theirs. And that can get pretty confusing. Sometimes I feel...like we're pawns in a chess game: we're expendable.

The feelings of alienation from non-Aboriginal society were something different speakers addressed throughout the two-day period. Another man felt that his and some of his fellow inmates' present status was the result of practising cultural sovereignty now. In this passage he presented what he felt were the historical and cultural origins of the cultural differences:

For myself I've always been a pretty independent person. I grew up with my traditions. My parents, my grandparents, all the other people in my community, a lot of them are very strong in the culture, the values. A lot of it is...we never read no books, never had any radio, newspaper, TV or that. We never had no bibles. To maintain our spirituality, we maintained it through our ceremonies. I sometimes get offended when people compare it to religion and the bible and all that. If you want religion, by all means, go to church. For me, it's a way of life. And I understand this stuff. I understood it at a very young age because a lot of the things I was taught, that I learned from the ceremonies, I practise in my life, they were in direct conflict with the larger society. I think the values are different.

I think society is consumer-orientated, very materialistic. Native people are not like that. One of the teachings we have is to share whatever we have. One of the ceremonies that was made illegal was the potlatch ceremony from the B.C. Indians because people would give away their entire wealth, everything that belonged to them. They would just give it away. The Europeans couldn't understand that, the government couldn't understand that. So they made it illegal...

...one of the other important teachings is respect. Have respect for your people, your brothers. This society doesn't really have that because they created a justice system. Native people didn't have jails. They didn't have judges, lawyers and cops. There was no need for them to lock their doors, insure their cars [laughs] or their horses or whatever, 'cause there was no need. People respected

each other and a lot of people here don't respect each other. I think that's a big difference, comparing our values to the non-Native values in the larger society. I see the conflict in these values. I can't understand the concept of working for a living — to me it just doesn't seem right. Sell my time to somebody else so that he can make money off of me. I can't understand the concept of possessing land or possessing houses...

I think one of the things that made a big impression on me was one of my uncles telling me that...I guess they were signing the treaties and Sitting Bull was against the signing because he couldn't understand the concept of anybody actually owning the land. One of the things that he did was he actually picked up a hand full of dirt from the ground and said, "I wouldn't even sell you this much."

...For myself, I never gave up ownership of lands. I never gave up ownership of myself. And this is what the *Indian Act* is all about. We're supposed to be the Queen's people and the government's, wards of the government. I can't understand that, I'm my own person — my own individual. I live my life according to the traditions and that's it. I have no responsibility to society. I have no responsibility to the justice system. The only responsibilities I've got are to myself, my family, my people and my nation. This is what I was taught, all these things to the Native people...four, that's a very sacred number to us. The four directions, the four values, the four seasons...these are all lessons to help us survive. When there was no government to look after us.

And I think it's what's going to help us to survive this government, these people that are trying to oppress us. Continually trying to make it difficult for us to live, to survive. They are continually trying to oppress us. But I guess my answer to that is that you're only oppressed if you let them oppress you. For me I got no respect for this administration. I got no respect for the justice system or cops or whatever. I don't care. It don't matter to me. The only thing that matters to me is my traditional values. This is what comes first, I place this above everything else.... I think it's important that we be allowed to practise our culture inside this institution. For myself, I was going into sweats when I was just a young kid. Even when I was on parole...they allowed me that. While I was incarcerated one of my brothers died. The institution would not allow me to go to his funeral. I questioned my parole officer and asked to go and she denied me. I can't see a reason for it but that was it, that was her reaction. So I said, "Fine, all right." But I turned around and went anyway — irregardless of the consequences — because that was important to me.

Just recently we lost...actually we've been steadily losing a lot of strong individuals, a lot of potential leaders that have died. Who were in this institution but died. Their lives have been short. They're gone now. This is what's happening because of these people forcing their system on ours. That's something I can't tolerate. I can't understand it. It even puzzles me more when I see our people accepting their values over ours.... I can't understand why people would do that. Why place a foreign government authority over our own? I can't understand it. So for me I try to live according to the traditions. The traditions say that this is the way you conduct yourself, and that's how I conduct myself. And that's what's important to me.

Though confusion was something the men often expressed in regard to the forces that eventually led them into incarceration, anger was often much more apparent. This man was noticeably angry when he said,

It all boils down to one thing: we've all been fucked around by society! That's the underlying thing here, that's how I feel about it. There's no reason to go through this little charade here. There's a lot of tension and whatnot that's a part of it. And we're feeling that on a personal level as we sit here. And a lot of us have to come to terms or at peace with it. Some of have to find a balance between that society and our own society. But that's getting hard to do.

The elusive balance that the last speaker referred to is a dynamic that all of the participants confronted, perhaps most intensely while living in the urban centre. The values and the pace that underlie life in the city were forces that left many of the participants feeling alienated. The effects of trying to survive in the urban environment were profound for this man, as they were for all of those who addressed this issue, and in this passage we can see his efforts to heal:

Well, learning how to survive in the urban wilderness has put me in the situation many times that I had to compromise the morals and the values that I was brought up with, with my grandparents — the teachings and whatnot. It took away some of my self-respect and dignity, some of the things that I'm learning, when I'm here in the institution, to get back somehow, little by little. But I'm managing to relate more on a human level with regard to the natural order and the earth. I realize my place there. That's where my heart and where my teachings come from. I think society has taken a lot of the appreciation, a lot of the living out of life. It's somehow reduced it to suit their own need. We haven't actually learned to live in balance with creation. And that's what strengthens my belief; the "natural disasters" that they [mainstream society] term, these things happen for a reason. I believe that honestly. To have an earthquake or tornado go right through an urban centre is like, to me, somehow justified. Some people may think that's kind of insane to think that but I think people who do exist in that society have to realize where their living is actually coming from: it's coming from the earth. If we keep desecrating our holy land...one day we're going to end up not being here in this form, in a material form. I believe that.

Repeatedly, the men focused on survival in the urban centre as a force that denied them the full expression of their identity; in many ways survival in the mainstream was contrary to practising their own culture because they felt the two cultures were so incompatible. In the following passage the speaker identifies how his sense of Aboriginal identity was threatened in the urban centre and in the justice system; he also shares with the group how he was able to protect himself from its potential diminishment by listening to himself and drawing on the foundation of his family and community:

As opposed to diminishing it: living in the city. I was always on the run when I was younger and I never really had any stability... As I got older, past eighteen, that set the pattern for my life, surviving on the street. A person's got to eat, a person's got to have a warm place to sleep, clothes, drive a car: these are the things you need nowadays to get by. When I was younger I never really pursued my education and I never really was interested in employment. But there have been times when I have gone back to school or worked for a living — I accidentally found work a few times! [laughs] But that's the part that actually diminished my culturally identity: the things I did in order to survive. The criminal activity, a lot of it was not conducive to having a very strong identity — selling drugs, robbing, all these other things, these things that I did for money. I think that these were the things that diminished my cultural identity....

I think it was more diminished because...I spent a lot of time in remand centres fighting charges. A lot of charges I picked up when I was younger, it was just a matter of fighting those charges through the courts and not being allowed out on bail. This took a lot of time away from my life. Sitting on remand for eight months, nine months and then finally having a charge thrown out of court. That's a big space of time when you can't go to sweats, and other things! So it kind of diminished but it didn't weaken...I guess to a point it did weaken a little but not to the point where it really suffered. Because all these things they tell us, they build up inside us but you just don't have to pay attention to them, listen to yourself — that's the important thing! If you start listening to the people in society telling us all, "You're a bunch of losers, you're alcoholics or you're drunks, you're less than anybody else in society." I think that's when a lot of people get more confused and that's where your connection to the spirit is damaged and becomes confused and maybe lost. If we pay attention to what's inside us, we can't go wrong.... I guess everybody was bombarded with these feelings of inadequacy or whatever. Whether you believed them or not, makes a big difference. But I never really believed that I was less than anybody else...I always believed that I'm all right.

I'm Anishnabe, something to be proud of. It's not the same as other people but it's no worse, no better, just different.... The Creator created us like that. A lot of people fall into that, when they start listening to what society thinks of them. And that's where the problems start. But for myself, I've always been Anishnabe...I've never felt less than society. I think for the most part it amused me and kind of puzzled me. But it amused me and I felt like I could laugh at these people. And to a large extent, I still do. Look at me, they have me locked up here in jail but I still have a sense of freedom and a sense of brotherhood. These are my brothers here, I would do anything for these guys. The people out on the street, the woman and children, the elders, I would give my life for them. It would be easy for me. Because I know where I'm going when I die. It's just a matter of moving across the river. I was told these things when I was young. And they made a lot of sense to me. And still today, when I live my life, I see reflections of what these old people told me — what my family and friends explained to me. And it kind of clicks, it reminds me, it reinforces what they were saying was right.

In the end the barriers to the expression of Aboriginal identity for these men were primarily in the prison environment and in the mainstream culture's marginalization of Aboriginal cultures that, for many speakers, was experienced as racism and alienation.

Empowerment: Cultural Identity Strengthened or Enhanced

In the prison the main group representing the concerns of Aboriginal men is the Native Brotherhood Organization; most of the men in the group identified themselves as members of this organization. For many of the speakers the organization was central to their cultural identity in the present and it is clearly a profound source of strength in this stifling environment. For example:

But for me personally I felt that I really didn't have an identity because I didn't know my own roots. So, in that sense, it wasn't strong for me until I got here. This is why Native Brotherhood Organization [NBO] is so important...it has had a profound effect on me because I've learned what it is to be a First Nations man. I'm learning about the sacred circle itself, the pipe, there are some members...a lot of us, we didn't know what sweet grass was. I'd heard of it but I'd never really seen it or smelled it or anything like that until I got here in 1987. My biological brother was president of the NBO at that time and he kept suggesting to me, not forcing it on me, but saying, "Hey you should get involved in this." At that time, when I got here in 1987, I had a real chip on my shoulder. So I couldn't be talked to or...made a suggestion — "Bullshit! I'll make my own decisions!" was my attitude. What I think is right. So in a lot of ways my thinking process has changed a lot. I'm kind of glad that, in a sense, I learned...as he [another member of the circle] said, we are in a vision quest here because some of us we are actually just learning about our culture. Like a sweatlodge, sweet grass, sage, cedar — what they really mean. And how you can use these medicines to help yourself heal.

But in the urban centre there's nothing, when I was there...there was lack of it. In terms of interaction between First Nations communities, there was lots of it but it wasn't always...[focused on learning cultural things]...basically our attitude was just try and survive. "Okay, lets try and make a \$1000 a day." Because, at that time we had very expensive habits, so \$500 or \$1000 a day habit, you had to generate that seven days a week. We didn't have to talk about cultural issues or anything like that. All your goal was trying to make that dollar and so that's where my life has always been — trying to chase that pot of gold. For us that's where it's been. But I found members in the community who had a very strong traditional background. I'm just starting right now to learn from them because I didn't listen to them since I had such a chip on my shoulder at that time. I understood what they were saying but didn't fully understand, but they still stuck in my mind. Now when someone brings something up in one of our circles I kind of remember or reflect on what someone else said that reaffirms or confirms what

they are saying. To me I'm a great listener, sometimes I don't say a damn thing because I'm learning from everyone and I can understand what they are saying because I can relate to what each individual is saying....

So my learning has been here! NBO! That's why I said it's the most profound organization for me. Because that's where I've learned to deal with me, as a person, understand my roots and my culture, have a sacred circle and all that.... What's strengthening I guess was my family... I didn't know too much about the culture until I got in trouble with the law and started going through the institutions and whatnot. Since then I kept going to the sacred circles and things like that...that's exactly what strengthened it. It's what made me aware of it. And ever since I've been aware of the Native culture and what I learn from other people, makes me feel good. To know that I'm Native and I'm proud of it.... I didn't want to be Native when I was a kid because everybody used to bug me all the time.

The NBO has provided this man with access to important information, resources and people who have given him the strength he needed in order to explore, develop and support his Aboriginal identity. This story was a familiar one for the men in the circle. In urban communities there were often no supports or places to learn about their Aboriginal heritage so, apart from what they may have learned in their youth, many of these men began examining and developing their Aboriginal identity in the prison — a process more than one member of the group likened to the traditional vision quest. Throughout, many men were able to draw on the lessons of their youth and the support they receive from other inmates as a foundation for the process of reasserting their Aboriginal identity, which they felt they denied in the urban centre. Here is another example:

I guess my strength was being on the reserve. That's where my awareness of the culture was. But only on a survival basis. I was brought up by my grandmother who knew a lot about the culture and she'd talk a lot about it, but what she talked about was what used to be and not what's now. I lost all of that awareness when I moved to the city. I got distracted just by having to survive in an urban centre. You know, there was no cultural awareness programs in the city. There was no place I could go and hear about the culture. The only place I could see my culture was down Main St. in the bars. It was the only place I could go to find my own kind. There was nothing there, especially in my time. This is why, when I came into the institution, I learned everything with the culture. It's where I picked up my cultural identity. I didn't really have an identity out there. I was only culturally aware. But I had no identity that I could say I belonged to a particular group. I was always trying to figure that out. Now when I go to the urban centre, there are a lot of things that are culturally oriented. But you are still shunned away from them because of your background, because of being in the institution and the fear of a negative element influencing the positive elements out there that they feel they have. You still get shunned. So the weakness is still there in the urban centre.

This is where I got my strength, inside the institution. This is where I learned everything, where I picked up everything I know now. Feelings I have toward my culture and my cultural identity have been passed onto me or given to me by the support of the brotherhood. At one time culture and being Native didn't mean anything to me. Now, I have a different view: it's the most important thing in my life. It's something that I want and I want to keep.

This man expressed similar sentiments:

I don't say it's good to come to the institution to learn the spiritual way. But it ended up that way. I guess it's for the best because I learned more than I did when I was on the streets.... And you can't learn enough in all the time I've been here. You keep learning. Every time you wake up.

Though none of the men said they want to be or like being incarcerated, many were thankful for the fact that it was the place they began to learn more about their identity as an Aboriginal person thanks to support of the Native Brotherhood Organization. In the circle the men often spoke of the importance of their friendships or sense of brotherhood within the institution as a source of strength and support:

And I don't like jail, it's not a very good situation to be in. But my [brothers] make it easier. There are some good people that are working with us...they make it easier for us. They offer us their strength. The [brothers] really pull together when they need to. There's a strong sense of brotherhood in this institution.

In fact, when the discussion of factors that strengthen Aboriginal identity began the first issue raised was sticking together as Aboriginal inmates, formally under the umbrella of the NBO and informally by sharing information and resources together.

In a related way, the men identified the importance of Aboriginal people sticking together as a community — in the past through food gathering for the collective survival, and joining together in the present to rally around the political, social or justice issues. One man stated that it strengthened his identity to fulfil his roles and responsibilities in his community.

One of the most referred to themes over the two-day period was spirituality. Without question most of the men drew enduring strength from learning about and practising their Aboriginal cultural and spiritual traditions — the ceremonies, the rituals, the prayers, the music and dance. One example was the sweatlodge; most of the men referred to the fundamental importance of the sweatlodge in the prison. At the time of the learning circle they were allowed to have 12 to 16 sweats a year but they were fighting the administration to have more. The men informed us that in the Stoney Mountain Penitentiary over 50 per cent of the 500 or more inmates are Aboriginal, yet church services are offered weekly and poorly attended while the Aboriginal men feel grossly underserved with respect to practising their own spiritual traditions.

Still, the visits from elders, the sweats and the ceremonies that were available were crucial to their process of healing and growth. Here are some examples of what they said about their spiritual practices and beliefs:

I think it's the Creator. Like all these things here [referring to items listed on flip chart that help strengthen identity] are all things that happened because there was enough people praying to the Creator asking for strength. All this time when our Native culture was made illegal and all the time it was being suppressed there was still enough people praying to the Creator to ask him: "Take pity on us. Give us strength." I mean this is what we're supposed to do when we burn our tobacco or sweetgrass, we ask for strength and the Creator gives it to us because we do this. To this another man added what he knew about these things:

When the eagle comes around, there's a legend that goes: the eagle told the people, "As long as you're praying and trying to be good I will always come and fly around." That's the legend...so when you see him you give tobacco and you get stronger.

Many of the men in this group often referred to the spiritual dimension of their identity and the faith that helps them carry on within the institution. This man was one of the more vocal spiritual seekers; he told the group these stories to articulate the basis of his strength, direction, healing and faith:

One time there was a group of us in the circle and this lady was pretty sick in the hospital. One of the [brothers] said to us, "When you guys go home could you maybe burn some sweetgrass or some sage and say a prayer for this lady." I don't know how many people in the group did this but I did. And fortunately the lady got better and that's how I develop my faith in the Higher Power or the Creator or the God or the Medicine or the Healing, whatever you want to call it. But while I was praying the grandfathers showed me that woman lying in the hospital — I could see her there. She got better and when she did I burned my sweetgrass and said, "Thank you grandfather for hearing that."

And when we have a sweatlodge sometimes if a hawk comes over he carries our prayers when the eagle is not around, so it's kind of a blessing is what it is, it's a blessing. And this is something that a lot of our people don't know, they don't know these things. This is what it's about, it's about prayer, faith and developing your faith.... These are the things that developed my faith in the Higher Power because I know that I'm only a human being and there is no way that I can do anything but if I conduct a special little smudge by myself or a ceremony and it happens [what I'm praying for]...I feel good within myself...

When you are by yourself, if you go to the mountains to fast or whatever. And you want something to happen and there's no one around but you and creation — and that thing happens!... See we have to develop our faith and fortunately for me that lady got better and I don't know if it was because of my personal prayer or what. But the main thing is that she got better and she's into her culture and she helps out a lot of the [brothers] in Alberta.... So I feel good about

that and it developed my faith in the higher power.
Later the same man shared another experience:

What strengthens my culture is when it's above 100 outside and we're having a sweat and you hear thunder and there's not a cloud in the sky. You say, "Well how does that happen?" Things like that. I sweat with this grandfather that passed on. We went in the sweatlodge, it's raining, it's cloudy, the sun is not shining. He said, "When we come out the clouds will be gone." We came out, the clouds were gone, still raining, the sun was shining, there's an eagle flying around the sweatlodge and a big rainbow there. This is something that makes me feel good. These are human beings, they're channels. If they want something done they perform a ceremony. Whether it's a piece of an animal they use or plants or some kind of special remedy they use, this is how they do it. And the power of their faith and belief. And that's what has inspired me to pursue my culture to the fullest....

I always keep an open mind and try to learn and listen. I'm not better than or know more than anyone but I'm willing to share my knowledge, my findings or teachings with these guys. Some guys ask me about their dreams and I can't interpret some of their dreams but I tell them that if I can find an answer for them I will and I leave it like that until I get an answer.

In the last part of this passage the speaker refers to the way these men share the information and resources they have with the other inmates; this seemed to be an important way for all of them to learn and central to the values of sharing that many identify with. Additionally, like the man who told the two spiritual stories, the men in the circle often spoke about the importance of their ancestors and elders in their lives. One man had no family and stated that it was very difficult for him to let down his defences in order accept the support offered by fellow inmates because he was not used to people supporting him. Still, he was comforted by the offers; this man also drew strength from his Aboriginal forebears:

I guess the people who had any kind of importance in my life were those old people who managed to retain a lot of the culture. Those who went before us. The ones that were here when the white people first got here. They were put through a lot; they endured a lot. They were a lot stronger, they lived up to what they believed. And it's one of the things that I hope I will be able to reflect on when my time comes to enter into the other world there, that I've actually managed to live up to some of the teachings and the life way of our people. That's how I want to find comfort in my life, that's what I need, that strength there.... Sure it's all fine and dandy that we could keep talking about it but it's actually making a difference. We have to do that within our own lives. If we're gonna keep bullshitting to ourselves than we're not going nowhere. And I see that a lot here...in the institution amongst my brothers here. And I'm hoping, I have faith, like the old people had, faith that things are going to get better. I still managed to retain a lot of those virtues.

Like all of the other learning circles, the participants here held their elders in very high

esteem; rarely was their importance questioned. One man stated that in his community he was taught that you never question an elder, "no matter what they do", but he also expressed disappointment when he saw elders intoxicated, as he came from a community where drug and alcohol abuse was almost universal. Shortly after this man spoke another member of the circle stated his feelings about elders:

Sometimes our elders get just as confused as we do and sometimes they abuse alcohol. I don't find any fault with that. I guess I feel that everybody is a human being.... I know that I've had an opportunity to drink with them. I spent a lot of time with them, socializing and doing ceremonies, but sometimes I would drink with them. And sometimes when I would drink with them, whether it was a bottle of wine or whisky or whatever, they would open the bottle... and spill just a little bit into the cap and pull out a cigarette and...go pour it by a tree. This is only one little aspect, they are so filled with the need to share everything, to give thanks for everything. Even something like alcohol or tobacco they would still go and offer it. I don't know, some other people, they just condemn alcohol and they just condemn drugs and if you are doing drugs or drinking then you are a piece of shit or whatever. You are no longer an Indian. That's the kind of attitude that some people come off with. You're not spiritual because you're drinking or you're not spiritual because you have a toke or whatever.

And to me, I'm a human being. I'm not a saint, I don't try to be better than anybody else or condemn anyone else. These things happen inside our communities and even our elders are affected by them. I mean, we're just young guys, I'm just a young guy, barely thirty, and some of these people have lived sixty, seventy-five years or more! And all that time they've lived through that oppression of the larger society. And they've lived through harder times like the depressions and when Native people had to ask for passes to leave reserves. There was no such thing as welfare on the reserves at that time. They still had to live through those times and they survived and are still here today. And they still had problems despite all the gifts from the Creator. They still get weak. I guy I really admire...he was talking here the other night about losing his faith. His relationship with the Creator got so bad that he suffered with his foot. Then when he got back on the right track, on the right road, through that he was healed. You know? So I guess everybody is a human being.

So my elders, our elders, the old people who have all these gifts and knowledge, I still respect them. I don't condemn them for every once in a while getting drunk or whatever. I still feel proud of them, I haven't lost any respect for them in that regard.

Many of the men in the circle had a strong grasp of the history of colonialism and the effects it has had on their lives and on their families, communities and nations. As this next speaker states, he began learning about his Aboriginal identity in the institution; even so, he was very articulate about the impact of specific government policies and historical events on his people. In this passage one can see the value he attaches to the elders and the spiritual teachings

he has learned; one can also see how his anger has really strengthened his will to educate himself about Aboriginal people, how they have been oppressed by government and religious institutions and their path of sovereignty for the future:

...the one thing culturally that strengthened anything was that I met an old man in Alberta.... This old man lived in Calgary. So when we called him here he didn't hesitate to come. All he wanted was gas money. That's about a seventeen-hour drive. He took me in when I was in Alberta and he showed me a few things. He never gave me shit. And so when I called him here and told him where I was, he didn't give me shit, he just said, "Okay, I'll come and see you." So we arranged to have a sweat and everything. And I've never really spent a whole lot of time with him, however the little time I spent with him I learned some things from him. And that's my cultural strength.

I was first introduced to the culture in the institution. Back home they're all Catholic. They're all brainwashed including my own biological family. It's really sad to see, they all go to church and they don't realize this church is so insidious in its background. They're not all Christian people, there's a lot of preachers who literally raped our brothers and sisters in the residential schools.

As far as an impact the *Indian Act*, again with the social services, at age seven I was taken away from home. Something happened...for about seven years, until I was fourteen, I abused solvent. And I don't remember much of that point in my life. It's amazing that I am able to function today at a university level. It's through the culture that I was able to do that. I go to sweats here as often as I can. We don't get much of that, all those things when you look at the *Indian Act* back then when the reservations came into being, the same policies are in this institution. They don't give us [the power to practise our culture]...they do but they're not serious about it, they're just playing around.

And there's a good reason for that, we are an industry, we fill this place up, we put a lot of money in people's pockets. This province alone spends a half a billion dollars on the justice system. And most of their clients are Indian people. And they will do anything and everything to feed itself, the system is designed that way. It doesn't give a shit about anybody. They may think it is they may say it is, but the old people say, "Hey, it's not good!"

As far as self-government, I think it's going to happen in the next 10 to 15 years. The younger people are just going to say, "The hell with you! Get the fuck off our land!" And I hope that we will get international support because we will need it. And it's not so much the Canadian people in general, it's the government people and the policies. Because irregardless of what happens now or in the future we have to live together. But we don't have to live like this. And we can still exert our sovereignty and things like that. And I'm sure it will come. The people have not died, the culture is still there and it is only going to get stronger.

And just one other thing, I'm a Cree person, I come from the Cree nation. Traditionally, we are in Ojibwa territory. Like in Alberta, I was introduced to the Blackfoot people, I had a few ceremonies with them. Theirs is a little different. The Ojibwa with their Medewin teachings, it's similar but it's their own unique culture. They're actually a whole different nation. They're not the same. But

they're just as beautiful, just as original as we are. And I've enjoyed listening to them, I've enjoyed their ceremonies. I've taken from them and I've given to them. They are very caring people. And I think one of the most important teachings they have is the Seventh Fire. It brings to light that, yes, the time is right, the time will come when we will take our own place in society. And it's written, it's a teaching! It's right in the culture, that's the way it's supposed to be. It's happening right now, we've seen it and it's going to continue to happen.

Throughout the two days of conversation, this man offered similar insights that showed his broad understanding of the forces that shape his Aboriginal identity — in the present, the past and in the future. It was clear that for many of the men speaking, understanding the political and historical controls on their people was empowering as it gave them the ability to name the source of their long-term oppression and begin to mobilize against it. Additionally, with this important information the men typically were able to shed a lot of the shame they had previously internalized as a result of being bombarded with racist messages throughout their lives.

The theme of cultural reawakening was another issue the men focused on as it was something they experienced on an individual basis (the vision quest that some men spoke of) and collectively. Further, the fact that there is currently a massive renaissance in Aboriginal cultures throughout the country and the world was something that strengthened the men in this group. The oldest man in the circle had been through the residential school, the army and various prisons; he shared parts of his life in view of the resurgence of tradition that he witnessed around him, some of which he practised throughout his life:

The Native way, well it's starting to come back now, not like in the '60s. But now it's [the culture] starting to come back little by little. I see it. I'm forty-six now and I've seen a little bit of life out there.... At that time too, in the early '60s, they used to have sundances in secret, so the RCMP wouldn't know. Because they weren't allowed to have their own sundances. That's where I used to see...[describes ritual/ceremony where people hang from thongs through the skin at the front of their shoulders]...that's where they seek their vision. And that's when they know if it's an eagle or a buffalo has their spirit. That's their messenger to the Great Spirit. Like a white guy would say that's an angel, that's the same thing. That's how I understand it. Whereas long ago, white people thought just because we pray to an eagle, they thought it was their God but it just the messenger to the Great Spirit. But I never had the experience to do that.

I fast, once a year I make it a habit to do that. Even when I'm incarcerated I do it, for three days without food and water. Every spring I do that. I'm doing it for the people that left us...and Jesus. That's why I'm going to fast again next month. My grandfather and grandmother used to make me fast when I was younger. It was hard on me when I was young but now it's a habit — without water or anything. They say Jesus died for our sins and I'm gonna respect him for that.

He died for all mankind they say. That's why I'm trying to go both ways. I'm going to use my Native culture too, because I'm brown or red or whatever you call me, because God or [uses Aboriginal word equivalent] made us that way. He gave us a tongue to use. That's why I believe in my own culture.

I'm not trying to take sides but that's in me, I'm just trying to express myself. And I hope I'm on my right path but that's up to the Great Spirit to decide. And friends help me on that path. I know I did wrong on that path but I regret it...

This man, like others in the group, expressed a will to integrate aspects of his Aboriginal spiritual traditions with mainstream concepts as both seemed to offer him strength. Still, the basis of the strength many of the men felt seemed to be simply the knowledge that Aboriginal traditions were recovering from the effects of long-term suppression by legislation and other methods of social control. For example, this man, like others, felt the hope of the next generation: "I think one of the things that have strengthened our communities is the younger people have taken the initiative to be more involved in their culture."

One of the men found his source of strength in practising some of the traditional dances of his nation. In the following excerpt he identifies how his culture underlies his ability to endure the various ups and downs in his life:

As far as the event that diminished my culture, the one thing that comes to mind is drugs and alcohol. That was my downfall. Because everybody around me drank and smoked drugs, so I had to do the same thing too in order to fit in. And I started drinking somewhere around the age of 8 or 9 — with my friends. My father never drank, he gave up drinking when I was born. But when my father and mother divorced she took all the kids...so somehow along the way I started drinking and smoking drugs, I started smoking drugs when I was 13. But that was my downfall because, in the area where I'm from...and Alberta in general, in the latter part of the 1960s it was very culturally strong, there was a lot of pow wows, sundances, raindances, handgame tournaments — all kinds of things like that were going on. So at that point in time Alberta was really strong that way, but there was a lot of us who fell into the drinking and smoking drugs aspect of life. From there it branched off into stealing and, eventually, it landed us up in here.

But despite all those downfalls I still managed to get back into my culture — which was never lost. I was lost, but my culture was never lost. But I had found it again and it was through a lot of life experiences that I lived and I always was able to go back to my culture because that seemed to be the only way. Every thing I did and everything I tried to do all failed! For 27 years, 28 years I did everything my way because I stole...you name it. It hasn't worked. So the only thing that seemed to work was my culture so I got into dancing, pow wow dancing. That changed my whole entire life because, I was still using drugs, but I quit drinking.

Then I decided, one night, to take a couple of shots of booze — just for one night! And that one night cost me my time in here. So, that was quite the expensive lesson just for one night's pleasure. Now I have to live with that, and

it's the hardest part of all knowing that I have a dance outfit and there are some the things that I'm doing wrong, sure there are little things in my life that are wrong, but I yearn to be dancing in pow wows and all that. More than anything else in this world! And I can't do that because I'm locked up now. I can do it once a year and occasionally at little special events within the institution. So that gives me strength: to just hold on just a little while longer until I do get my freedom and, hopefully, eventually one day when I get back out there I'll retain this spiritual awakening and continue to use it out there.

Again, we see how many of the men in the group drew immense strength from their pursuit of knowledge and the practical experience of their Aboriginal heritage.

Lastly, these are some of the other issues listed by the men under the discussion of what strengthens their identity: non-Aboriginal people in solidarity with Aboriginal people; historical events such as the 1969 white paper and the Oka standoff; and cultural education and programs.

Two Communities: Aboriginal and Mainstream

The following table portrays some of the phenomena, from the mainstream and Aboriginal communities, that have an impact on the Aboriginal identity of the participants in the inmates circle. The table does not show a consensus but only a representation of some of the main points from pie diagrams drawn by the group and from their discussion.

Aboriginal	Mainstream
elders (+)	school (-)
family (+)	foster care (-)
reserve community (+)	urban community (-)
ceremonies, feasts, festivals (+)	employment (+), unemployment (-)
relationship to Creator/spirituality (+)	alcohol and drug abuse (-), recovery (+)
dancing (+)	criminal behaviour (-)
animals (+)	racism (-)
alcohol and drug abuse (-)	justice system: oppressive and discriminatory (-); prison as place to meet other Aboriginal men and learn about identity — vision quest (+)
social/political organizations (+)	poverty (-)
social workers (-)	mainstream values (-)
language (+), lack of access to (-)	friends (+)
chiefs (+)	abuse, violence (-)
sports (+)	counselling programs (+), lack of culturally

	appropriate services (-)
hunting, fishing, trapping (+)	religious organizations (-)
arts and crafts (+)	survival ethic (+)
abuse, violence (-)	family (+)
values (+)	lack of role models (-)
land (+)	no reflection of Aboriginal cultural identity (-)
food (+)	money-based system of values and survival (-)
education/teachers (-)	
police (-)	

A general pattern that emerges from the comparison of the two communities is that the men consistently identified the transition from their Aboriginal community to the mainstream as a painful and confusing ordeal. This man speaks about surviving in the urban centre, or the "urban wilderness" as another speaker called it:

In mainstream society...the biggest thing for me was survival and it had a negative effect on me. I was so busy trying to survive I forgot everything around me. My awareness just disappeared. You know, out in the country the trees, the water, the birds, everything — you notice. You come to the city and it's just a matter of time you can walk out and just about walk right into a tree and not notice it, or a little bird sitting on your window ledge, you wouldn't notice it. You're so distracted from everything else just trying to survive. You become greedy. You hurt people because you gotta survive yourself. You don't care who you step on in order to get what you want. In order to make sure you're taking care of number one. And sometimes you don't know what you're doing, you just go ahead and do it. It becomes a part of you. You gotta survive! You go out and try to get a job and it's not easy to get a job. So if you can't get a job what do you do? You turn to welfare. Welfare is not enough. Pretty soon you start taking things that don't belong to you or you haven't paid for. Or you start scamming, trying to find a way to make money. So survival was the biggest distraction for me in mainstream society.

Other speakers in the circle spoke about the same issue from their own experience. This man talks about his feelings of dealing with the culture shock of moving from the reserve into the city as a young person; in the first passage he focuses on the place of money and in the second he speaks of related issues:

Money! It was always a problem and a concern, that I always had to have money to survive in mainstream society. Because you need it! If it cost you a dollar to get from one end of the city to the other, well that became a negative because maybe there's a drum group that was practising on the other side of the city. But you

couldn't get there so that was negative...you had to have money to get to these places, food, stuff like that....

Change of lifestyle — from Aboriginal community right into the mainstream. It was almost like a culture shock! Because you have to get used to avenues, streets, which direction avenues went, which direction streets went. The lifestyle of living in the city because everything surrounds money; things like that, personal needs, eh? So that was a change of lifestyle all together: going from Native, hunting and trapping, to, all of a sudden, living in the city — not knowing anybody! It's a whole different lifestyle all on its own. So that was a negative thing for me. And work, in order to survive you had to work. Either that or else steal. So I chose work. At that point in time. Which was positive because I learned that anything in life you want you have to work for — whether it's a pair of shoes or whatever. It's much easier to go steal it, but why? When you can work for it and get it the honest way. That's what I was taught but I guess I didn't practise it too much.

Money was an issue for many of the men in the group; more than one speaker expressed the contrast between the mainstream culture's emphasis on money and the Aboriginal community's emphasis on other aspects of life such as, in this man's view, well-being, pace of life and a sense of freedom:

Money-wise — people in society are always greedy about money. They need money for this, they need money for that. They use their money to try and be better than anybody else; to show they have this power, they've got this ability, or this knowledge.... On a reserve, everybody helps one another, whether it's financially or whether they are feeling grief for someone, they're always showing some kind of care or concern for one another or helping each other out with food and stuff like that if they are short. The main concern on the reserve is not money...but their well-being. Knowing who they are and what they do for their cultural identity. That's enough to make them feel proud and it's not the money like in the mainstream.... most of my childhood being in trouble has been in the mainstream. But being on the reserve for six months, that was the longest I actually stayed out of trouble.... the city is so fast moving compared to the reserve where everybody moves at their own pace. It's all open country and people feel obligated to do what they feel is necessary to do. No traffic lights! That's another thing I found when I went to the reserve, no traffic lights. They've got roads, gravel roads and side roads, and you don't have to stop at a curb for traffic lights. It's all free moving. It's like mother earth just kind of guides you right through, you get that sense of freedom being out in the open in the country.

The ethic of sharing and concern for others, in the Aboriginal community, was something that many of the men in the circle spoke about throughout the two days of discussion. In the following quotation we can get a sense of the traditional roots of this ethic and the impact it had on the man speaking:

Hunting and trapping also played a key role in the way I was brought up because I was taught that whenever you were hunting and trapping you were providing for people. So, whenever I shot a deer I gave a lot of the meat away to the older people. Because when I was young it was the older people hunting and they gave the food to my dad which provided for our family. So when I grew up I did the same thing.... That's a big part of our cultural identity — hunting and trapping — maintaining that!

Similarly, one of the other men in the circle talked about respect and sharing as important values he learned from his community. In this passage he draws a link between the two:

I learned respect in the community... it is something that I carried out my whole life. I respect a lot of people and I don't like to show disrespect. And one of the things I saw in the community...was that nobody locked their doors. You could go anywhere and you never had to worry about people coming in and stealing anything off of you. In the community it was understood, if you had something, if you had a power saw or something, you could leave it outside and your neighbours or your family could come and borrow it and use it and bring it back and take care of it like it was theirs. That was something that was understood, you didn't have to ask or anything. People were good like that, they shared everything they had.

Needless to say, moving from this type of environment to the urban centre was an immense change of traumatic proportions for some of the men.

In the opening hours of the learning circle with the inmates it quickly became evident that these men feel they are, in many ways, at the front lines of a cultural confrontation that fuels their determined resistance to assimilation. One can see this theme in the way they speak about their attempts to make a transition to the urban lifestyle. The theme is ever more apparent when the men speak about their experiences in some of the institutions of the mainstream society — social services, the justice system, schools, churches. Among these and many other institutions, the men focused on schools when they were comparing the two societies. Without exception, the schools were run by non-Aboriginal representatives of the mainstream and, in most cases, were experienced as simply another agent of control by these men. Here are some examples of what they said:

I actually quit school. It was more or less partly my mother's idea because what they wanted to do was have two systems of education — one for the white people and one for the Indians. And when we got to a certain grade they slot the Indians off to the side. They would start taking career training right away; you were either going to be a welder or a carpenter or something like that. And these people continued on with the higher education, academics and this and that to prepare them for university process of learning. So my mother didn't want to see me slotted off in this way and asked me, "Do you want to keep going to school or do

you want to quit? It's up to you, but you have to go to work." But I quit anyway and started to make money.

This was the experience of another speaker:

School — I hated school. I did not like school the least bit.... I didn't want to be there. I guess the reason I hated school was I always got spanked, on the hand, every day. Every day! That's all I had to look forward to. It got to the point where we had competitions to see who could get the most straps in a day. We actually had competitions to see who could get the most spanks in a day!

...I tried to go back to school. As much as I hated it...I found myself trying to go back to school and get education I needed. 'Cause nowadays it's no longer fighting with guns and stuff, you need education to fight the white man's system. That's just the reality. So I tried to go back but I never succeeded in obtaining the education that I need in order to get a job and do other things.

Interestingly, though both speakers clearly had terrible early experiences with the education institution — one, as a victim of overtly structured racism and the other with physical abuse — the second man now realizes the power this institution could afford him. Using his analogy of fighting, if knowing your enemy is fundamental to doing battle, then he perceives the education institution as one important starting point for obtaining knowledge and power in the dominant society.

Recommendations

We, the inmates of the Native Brotherhood Organization, recommend:

1. That First Nations Peoples and their governments be: (a) recognized as a distinct society and (b) have access to all the inherent rights that this distinction affords.
2. The incorporation of language courses and curriculum at all levels of educational institutions both on and off reserves where Aboriginal people reside.
3. That existing human rights laws, as they apply to Aboriginal people, be recognized and enforced.
4. That the existing treaties between Canada and the First Nations peoples be acknowledged, honoured and duly compensated.
5. The establishment of multi-disciplinary education programs that use ex-convicts as voices of experience to address the concerns and issues of Aboriginal youth.
6. That Aboriginal people be granted the right to practise our cultural, spiritual and traditional ways to the full capacity regardless of where we are.
7. That presently outstanding land claims be dealt with and settled promptly.

8. The re-establishment of traditional structures including the traditional family systems. For example, in the case of child custody, the child's extended family, their community and their nation have mandate over non-Aboriginal social service institutions.
9. That government and churches acknowledge and compensate for the atrocities committed in the Canadian residential school system against Aboriginal people.
10. The recruitment and promotion of Aboriginal people into management positions within the penitentiary.
11. That funding be increased in order to create new programs to deal with Aboriginal issues within federal penal institutions.
12. That the self-government of Aboriginal peoples begin within the federal institutions.

Conclusion

The men in the Winnipeg inmates' circle shared frank and profound insights into Aboriginal identity and the effects of institutionalization — all had lived involuntarily in at least two different institutions in their lives. Many of the men expressed a strong spiritual core to their identity; after everything they are able to maintain their faith and hope through their belief in the Creator. They also stated that the support of the Native Brotherhood Organization and their fellow Aboriginal inmates helped them to feel strong in their commitment to develop and express their cultural identity — the work of their vision quest — even though they felt greatly confined by the limitations and barriers of living in the penitentiary. Some participants in the circle also divided their life into segments of before and after they went to the urban centres; for most, life in their Aboriginal community was less stressful as they knew how to survive and what was expected of them. Upon leaving their community to go to the city, many of the men experienced a form of culture shock when they tried to cope in the new environment. More than one man in the group felt that the overwhelming stress of the unwelcoming city, the confusion and racism they experienced and the fact that they could not find employment — all of these things pushed them to begin a life of crime in order to survive.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the personal responsibility these men have for their actions and the crimes they have committed. These behaviours cannot be excused or minimized. At the same time it is vital that any attempt to describe and understand their world should account for the combined forces of personal choices they have made along with the historical

and institutional wrongs that have had a devastating effect on their lives (specifically their identity) and the lives of generations of Aboriginal people before them. Many of the men contextualized their lives in terms of the history of colonialism or contact with European people and, more immediately, their personal history of forced institutionalization. The foster care and adoption experience, for example, has suppressed the expression of their identity and left them confused and enraged. For their parents (and some of these men), it was the residential schools that had the virtually the same effect. In the search for some sense of secure identity many inmates internalized and acted on very negative and destructive messages that they learned about themselves — for example, that they were stupid, lazy, crazy, shameful, inferior, untrustworthy. Their life of crime then became one logical result of their acquired self-image. Further, the criminal justice system validates many of the negative images that they are fighting to overcome. Most of the men in this circle felt that one of the most difficult challenges they face as inmates is to heal (and there is a great willingness to heal among the men) in an environment that puts seemingly endless bureaucratic and administrative barriers in the path of their best efforts.

Appendix 4 — Descriptive Analysis of the Quebec City Professional Human Services Providers Learning Circle

For the description and analysis of the Quebec learning circle, this report relies on a translation of French-language texts written by the facilitators of that group. Without question, some information was lost in the process of translation, but the facilitators have recorded the most significant issues raised by the group of professional human services delivery people who took part in the circle. In all there were two French-speaking facilitators and ten participants — five men and five women.

Present: Core Elements of Cultural Identity

In the Quebec learning circle participants stated that they express their cultural identity, in the present, by identifying themselves as a member of the group or community of Aboriginal people. For example, "I express my cultural identity by identifying myself as a First Nations citizen." For different speakers in the group the combination of shared experiences and interactions with others living in the community combined to define the composite identity of the community members.

Cultural identity amounts to no more than our experiences as individuals and to our interactions with other people. This experience contributes to our collective consciousness.

In short, these people were saying one aspect of their cultural identity is simply their decision to identify with, and take part in, the community (including the institutions, etc.) of Aboriginal people. Part of what is shared by this community is a common history and common ancestors.

In a related way, the participants pointed to the importance of family for transmitting cultural learning; they expressed the necessity of elders, grandparents and parents as teachers of Aboriginal values and traditions. Speakers also focused on the importance of teaching their children these lessons as well. One speaker said, "I also express it [cultural identity] by giving to my son the Native teachings that I received from my family." In this brief statement the act of passing on the teachings seems to be an expression of cultural identity in itself.

Further, the activities of the community are, for some participants of the circle, focused on survival and adaptation to the environment — the urban environment in this case. "Our struggles and our willingness to survive, as Huron-Wendat," stated one participant "was the most

important factor in our cultural identity." On the same theme another speaker stated: "Our struggle as Native people expresses our cultural identity. We are survivors." Throughout the group's discussion it becomes clear that the "struggle" referred to here, at least in part, has to do with the fight for land title and Aboriginal rights. With respect to land one speaker spoke more specifically, "our relationship with the land, our territories. Our occupation and use of the land. These are all essential components of our cultural identity." On the topic of land use, another man said he expressed his identity as an Aboriginal person by hunting and fishing.

The issue of language was also raised by a number of speakers in this group; specifically, language was deemed by most to be an important component of one's Aboriginal identity. Yet, some speakers also expressed the idea that language, though potentially important, was not an essential aspect of cultural identity and cultural survival. The will to promote cultural expression seemed to be a greater priority in strengthening and supporting Aboriginal identity for some members of the Quebec group.

Lastly, a number of the speakers in this group stated that spirituality, philosophy or a common world view were all important aspects of their feeling of belonging and identity as an Aboriginal person. Though few people were specific as to the nature of these phenomena, one person did state that the fundamental values of Aboriginal people, as distinct from non-Aboriginal people, included sharing and respect.

The Past: Significant Places, Events, Groups, Programs

When the discussion of cultural identity turned to significant events, experiences and people from the past, one man in the Quebec learning circle talked a lot about his father's history. At one point he told the group what his father once told him about the meeting of the two cultures:

Today, the white man gives money as legacy to his children. For the Innu, it is different. They give, as a legacy to the younger generations, the use of the land and its resources. But, with sorrow in my heart, I have to tell you that you have to claim your legacy from the white man. They took away, from you and from me, your legacy.

This translation of the father's words emphasizes some important aspects of identity — that the land is central to what the man in the group felt was his Aboriginal identity. Before telling the group his father's words he told them how his father's life is part of his cultural identity: "His trapping skills, his knowledge about the land, the rivers, all of this contributed to

my cultural identity." For another speaker in the group, going to his traditional hunting and fishing grounds to practise these activities — to establish a relationship with the environment — was highly significant. The traditional hunting grounds continue to be a place of refuge where this man goes simply to feel at peace.

Family is a part of cultural identity that many people pointed to when referring to important events and people from the past. The Innu man who spoke about his father's hunting skills was joined by other people in the group who referred to their grandparents and other elders as people who helped strengthen their sense of Aboriginal identity in the face of confusion resulting from their contact with mainstream institutions such as the church or school. As with other learning circles, speakers consistently identified the old people as forces in their lives that allowed them to endure or see beyond the pain and turmoil they experienced in their families, communities and within themselves with respect to their Aboriginal identity — "They gave me back my strength to build my cultural identity." Some speakers also talked about their parents in the same way; one person in the Quebec group told the group how they took a journey in a canoe with their parents and this was an important event for gaining a sense of their identity.

In a related way, one woman lamented: "I realized that our cultural identity was fragile when I found myself speaking to my children in a foreign language [French]. It was a shock for me." Language and conveying culture to the young generation were important expressions of identity voiced in the first discussion on core elements of cultural identity.

Traditional objects were things that people felt contributed to their cultural identity. One man said, "the snowshoes, the drum [*teueikan*] are very important for us. It is as much important as the eagle feather out west." Similarly, different speakers pointed to legends, songs, pow wows, conferences and music festivals as significant things and experiences that were central to their Aboriginal identity.

Contact with the mainstream society is an event that many speakers identified as significant. One man stated: "The relationship that I had with non-Natives gave me an opportunity to think about my identity; I realized my difference and distinctiveness." The realization of one's difference is something several speakers expressed; for some it was a positive motivation to learn more about their Aboriginal heritage. One man met an anthropologist who was so interested in the Aboriginal culture that it prompted him (the speaker) to look more closely at it himself. For others the experience of contact with the larger society was not a

positive event. One person told the group that elementary school had a very negative impact on her identity. One other person expressed what many urban-dwelling people of Aboriginal ancestry have experienced:

I was born in Montreal, outside a reserve, and I spent my youth in an urban context. I realized then that I was different from the other people because this was reflected to me by society. When I returned to my community, I was also different from the other people. According to them, I was from the city. People did not see me as a member of the group. To them I was an outsider.

This scenario is common for urban Aboriginal people, especially Métis, who try to nurture links to a reserve community where they don't spend a lot of time.

One of the speakers in the Quebec circle cited the political barriers they must overcome to practise their traditional cultures — this person did not elaborate on the exact nature of these barriers but did say that fighting them has strengthened their resolve and commitment to their Aboriginal identity. In a similar way one speaker stated that he felt the *Indian Act*, in some way, contributed to maintaining cultural identity — even though it has many negative effects today.

Barriers: Diminishment and Denial of Cultural Identity

When the group began speaking about the things that they felt deprived of, one participant brought up the issue of history:

It is time things change. We have been deprived for too long. We have been deprived of our evolution, of our future. History has been imposed on us. We need our own history.

This statement has many implications; among them is that the impact of colonialism is so pervasive as to deprive Aboriginal people a self-determining role in the past, present and the future. Along the same theme, other speakers looked at the role of government in their lives as one of the main forces of cultural suppression, beginning with membership. One person raised the idea that the mainstream government institutions tried to integrate Aboriginal people into non-Aboriginal models that inevitably proved deficient. A good example of this phenomenon is the tribal institutions. One man stated that they "rely too much on non-Native values. They are a threat to our cultural identity." In a related way "using non-Aboriginal human resources in our own institutions" was expressed as an impediment to progress in the area of cultural identity. The educational institutions of the mainstream government are other institutional models that proved inadequate for Aboriginal people. Many of the group members experienced a harsh lesson in racism with their first significant contact with non-Aboriginal people, usually in a school setting

outside their community.

When the conversation turned to Bill C-31 participants had an array of insights to share. One important statement that summed up much of the discussion was this:

Establishing arbitrary administrative distinctions between "off-reserve Indians" and "on-reserve Indians" has not helped in strengthening our cultural identity. We have to get rid of that discrimination... Everyone has the right and the freedom to decide where he/she wants to live without having to lose his/her cultural identity.

The divisions in the Aboriginal community created by the *Indian Act* were a theme that pervaded many of the learning circle groups. Members often spoke with anger and frustration at these external definitions of who is and who is not a part of their community. As one speaker added: "When someone else is controlling your cultural identity you start to have doubts on who you are exactly."

One important insight from the Quebec circle that did not arise in other groups was the impact of Bill C-31 on women in the communities and the repercussions on the collective Aboriginal identity. One woman was frank about this relationship when she said, "In fact, in all those years [before C-31 changes], we have been deprived of a major component of our cultural identity — the Native women." Following this statement was this poignant addition: "We have also been deprived of the knowledge of Native women. We have exchanged our midwives for non-Indian doctors." Both of these assertions reveal the fundamental consequences of the colonization process; namely, they expose the government policy of assimilation through destruction of the essential fabric of Aboriginal families and communities. With the loss of important community members comes a loss of critical information and traditions that hold the community together. One part of the legacy that was negatively affected was the spiritual aspect. Speaking to this issue one participant stated: "We have been deprived of our spirituality. Missionaries have burned our drum."

One government model that is the subject of great criticism is the reserve community. While participants had varying opinions as to the impact of the reserve on Aboriginal identity, many speakers felt strongly that it was an oppressive force on identity. One point of view in the Quebec circle was that "Before 1993 the reserves did not contribute to our cultural identity because it prevented us from being in our hunting territories." Another issue raised was that having people of mixed ancestry on the reserves created problems in many communities. In general, the "social misery" of the reserve was a potent obstruction to nurturing identity within

the community. This fact underlay a concern for the youth living on the reserve expressed in the following statement:

We need to open up to other experiences; we must give some alternatives to our children — an alternative to suicide, to isolation. Today, the young people have nothing to do. They have no goals in their life and they cannot identify themselves to something. They relate to anything. I guess that the solution is that they have to go out of their community to find themselves. They have to take a distance to appreciate who they are as [Aboriginal people].... Reserves contributed at some point in our history to our cultural identity; but today, in 1993, it diminishes our cultural identity.

Alcohol was another area of much discussion with respect to the factors that diminish Aboriginal identity. One member of the circle stated,

I believe that alcohol does not contribute to our cultural identity. It is foreign to us. Nevertheless, many among us identify themselves to their bottle of beer. It should not be that way. Being "Indian" does not mean having to stand and stare into the bottom of a beer.

At other points in the discussion people talked about their life before and after alcohol; for the most part it seemed that the beginning of recovery was when people embarked on a determined path of learning about their Aboriginal heritage and identity.

The media in Quebec were considered to be a disempowering phenomenon with respect to cultural identity. Interestingly, the Oka crisis, though there were contrary views expressed in the group, was also seen to have negative impact on one speaker's Aboriginal identity.

Undoubtedly, the media portrayal of the Oka episode may have, to some extent, fuelled both of these comments.

Empowerment: Cultural Identity Strengthened and Enhanced

When approaching the whole issue of strengthening or empowering their Aboriginal identity different participants spoke of the importance of change and the need to integrate the traditional with the contemporary to forge a sense of identity that is based on the needs of the present and future. For one participant using new technology, such as the ski-doo, to hunt on traditional hunting territories was an example of how one could integrate the best of the past with more current needs and resources. Another speaker talked about using the media — such as community radio stations — in the capacity of bolstering Aboriginal identity. On this issue of change, one speaker stated very clearly:

Our existence as First Nation people changes, our mentalities have to change too. Our culture changes over the years because we have different needs. That does not mean that we are no longer Native. Culture is not something that has to remain unchanged. We have to have enough confidence in ourselves.

In summing up the issue of change so succinctly, this speaker also referred to another important aspect of change: it must begin with the confidence of the people who will carry out the changes and live with the results. Another woman spoke to this issue as well; she offered a number of important stages including: (1) respect for ourselves (as Aboriginal people) and others, (2) ignore negative impressions of others, (3) stop seeing ourselves as victims and (4) take responsibility for our own changes.

A concrete example of the process of change outlined by this woman concerns the issue of language. Different speakers spoke about how they felt deprived of their Aboriginal language. One person summed the dynamic this way: "Language contributes to my cultural identity. Our languages are a strength to our people. It has an important role to play in our cultural identity." Other speakers echoed these feelings (yet made the distinction that language was not necessary to one's Aboriginal identity). To this end:

A lot of us felt less "Indian" in the past because we could not speak the language. We decided to take some initiatives: we did research and studies on our language. Now we are trying to learn it to get it back. This has given us a chance to learn and review our history.... The language belongs to a nation and not to a single person.

This passage is an excellent illustration of how a group of people felt a deficit and overcame it by using the modern resources available to them. This act of self-determination was clearly empowering for the people who took part and it shows how they relied on confidence and faith in themselves to make changes appropriate to their contemporary need to access traditional cultural resources.

Education — both in the mainstream and Aboriginal communities — was another important topic of discussion for the Quebec learning circle. Among the speakers who felt education was a positive experience for them, one man stated that it "helped me in building my cultural identity. Today I am more responsible and I am in charge of my future." Other people

focused on the importance of teaching Aboriginal youth about their heritage at a time when it seems like they have nothing to reach out for; one participant stated that education programs that promote traditional activities contribute to cultural identity and it is important to encourage young people to participate in the traditional activities. In a related way another member of the group stated the importance of having healthy role models for the youth, and others, to emulate. Other people stated that groups in the community that promote the traditions were important, as are pow wows and urban cultural centres — all could potentially aid in the strengthening of Aboriginal identity.

For one woman, "our struggle to remain who we are and our resistance to our integration strengthen our cultural identity." This statement, though sweeping, reflects the feelings of other speakers who said that the Oka crisis was an important event that renewed their commitment to their Aboriginal identity and gave them a feeling of pride and strength in their culture. (Not all participants agreed with this perspective.)

Lastly, a speaker identified addictions recovery programs as playing an important role in helping to strengthen Aboriginal identity, in response to the devastating impact addictions in Aboriginal communities — both urban and rural.

Two Communities: Aboriginal and Mainstream

In this part of the group's activities they were asked to draw two circles that represent the two communities; in this chart is a sample of some of the significant issues outlined in the participants' circles. Though the emphasis (positive or negative) and the weight (the amount of the circle covered by the issue) varied from person to person, it is possible to see general trends in some instances:

Mainstream	Aboriginal
technology (+ and -)	Aboriginal values (+)
indifference & naivete (-)	ignorance (-)
democratic system of politics (+)	travel to other Aboriginal communities/nations (+)
individualistic values (-)	alcohol and drugs (-)
employment (+)	museum (+)
friends (+)	restrictive laws (-)
medical services (+)	socio-economic situation (-)

religion (-)	religion/churches (-)
media (-)	family and friends (+)
<i>Indian Act</i> (-)	language (+), lack of access to or inability to speak (-)
government (-)	internalized racism (-)
education: accurate and authenticate (+), inaccurate and racist (-)	elders (+)
ignorance (-)	spirituality (+)
public institutions (+ and -)	sports (+)
racism (-)	<i>Indian Act</i> (-)
acculturation (-)	stories and songs (+)
intolerance (-)	hunting and fishing (+)
restrictive laws (-)	work for Aboriginal Nation (+)
social welfare system	cultural pride (+)
drug and alcohol abuse (-)	relationship to the land (+)

Recommendations

1. We must assume our individual and collective responsibilities.
2. We need more autonomy.
3. Speed up the self-government process.
4. Better and more flexible mechanisms to settle land claims.
5. We must identify the areas in which we have skills and those where we need skills — e.g., needs assessment.
6. There must be continuity in the following: funding and financial support; post-secondary education, training and skills development; cultural centres; political organizations; promotion and preservation of languages; community radio stations; and museums.
7. Avoid duplication in our institutions; we should not have to deal with both the Department of Indian Affairs and our tribal or band councils.
8. We must have greater control of our institutions.
9. We must encourage and strengthen Aboriginal cultural identity among our youth.
10. We need more youth-oriented social intervention.

11. We have to return to our traditions through education programs such as NUTSHIMIU ATUSSEUN.
12. The inherent right of self-government for Aboriginal people must be recognized in the constitution.
13. Aboriginal people have to have equal access to financial resources without discrimination.
14. Governments and media institutions must promote an accurate image of Aboriginal people in order to counteract old stereotypes of Aboriginal people having a free ride on public funds. Instead, non-Aboriginal people should have information on the contributions of Aboriginal people and the destruction of their society and territory through colonization — i.e., restore the historical truth.
15. Greater financial resources for the promotion and development of Aboriginal cultural programs by Aboriginal people.
16. Governments should set up provincial information centres on Aboriginal cultures; these centres would be controlled by Aboriginal people.
17. We should set up a forum — funded by government — where Aboriginal people from all over Canada could meet with each other and with non-Aboriginal people. This could contribute to mutual understanding.
18. Aboriginal people should have greater access to political institutions.
19. Aboriginal people should have permanent representation in the Quebec legislative assembly as well as in the federal Parliament.
20. We must recognize Aboriginal peoples' right to participation, consultation and decision making on the major development projects affecting their lives and territories.
21. We must end the arbitrary distinction and discrimination between off-reserve and on-reserve Aboriginal people and grant equal access to all available programs.
22. Recognize the respect to which we are entitled as the first inhabitants and the first governments of this territory.
23. Aboriginal people should have the freedom to promote economic activities such as gambling, casinos, hunting and fishing.

Conclusion

A theme that was often raised in the Quebec learning circle concerned a conflict between

French-speaking Aboriginal people and English-speaking Aboriginal people. Many participants spoke about how they felt the English expressed a superiority toward them that was based on language. Judging by the convictions of some of the participants this phenomenon is pervasive; further, in the tone of some speakers one can see that the conflict is fuelled by both sides. Most of the discussion focused on how the superiority and misunderstanding only divided the Aboriginal nations and this could only be an undesirable outcome. Still, some speakers were less neutral. This statement exposes one side of the debate: "English-speaking Native people need to express themselves to hide their insecurity. True Native humility can be found in Quebec." Regardless of one's perspective in this discussion, language is complicated further in some communities because there is a mix of English, French and an Aboriginal language.

One other issue that arose in the Quebec circle more often than in other locations around the country was the Oka crisis. These people are more immediately effected by the outcomes of Oka in their daily life with, for example, the Quebec police force and media institutions. The comments from group members indicate a spectrum of feelings about the long-run impacts on their lives and their identity as contemporary Aboriginal people.

Appendix 5 — Descriptive Analysis of the Inuvialuit Youth Learning Circle

There were seven girls and five boys in the Inuvialuit youth learning circle, with ages ranging from 14 to 19 years. The Aboriginal nations represented in the group included Inuvialuit, Inupiat, Inuvialuktun, Inuvialuk, Gwichin and Inuktituk. Over the course of the two-day circle the facilitators had to work hard to get the young participants to speak on most of the issues. There was substantial inhibition among young people to open up to the facilitators, and much of the silence could be attributed to their age and level of maturity. They behaved like many adolescents — shy, fidgety and, at times, uninterested. Still the group seemed to give the research team an honest view of their lives as young Aboriginal youth living in a small northern urban community even though their accounts were usually very brief.

One important definition of culture that was used more than once in the group was that, at the core, culture was a way of organizing your life. Here is the definition in the context of this young man's example:

If there's a family skinning caribou, one group will start with the legs first and another group will skin a caribou starting with the belly first — they've grown up differently. They have a different culture.... It means that people do things differently. Culture is a way of organizing your life...and a way of doing things.... I used to live in Cambridge Bay...when I came here the language dialect was different, a lot of things were different. Here the dog team they use is a straight line dog team because of the bush. In Cambridge Bay the dog team is spread out — in the tundra there's no trees. So that's one difference in culture.

In the discussion following this statement it was noted that one's culture is a reflection of one's environment or natural surroundings — in some instances this definition became a touchstone for focusing the discussion. With respect to cultural identity one of the girls pointed to the important interrelationship between the individual and the cultural group when she said the culture was part of herself, part of her people and, accordingly, it made her feel a part of her people. As well, early in this learning circle one of the participants clarified that the term "Inuit" is simply a short form of "Inuvialuit" and Inuvialuit, to the Aboriginal people of the Far North, implied that one was from Canada as opposed to an Aboriginal person from Alaska, Siberia or Greenland. In the region around Inuvik, one of the members stated, there were four different language groups among the Inuvialuit.

The Present: The Core Elements of Cultural Identity

When the group members focused on what they felt were the components of their Aboriginal identity in the present, most often they talked about things they want to learn and do — this sense of longing seemed to be central to their lives. For example, one of the girls spoke with disbelief when she told the facilitators that they were only beginning to learn their own language.

Consistently throughout the two days of the circle most of the boys and girls enthusiastically advocated more access to language lessons; without exception they readily showed their eagerness to learn more, preferably in the school environment — "More classes in our own language [such as math or social studies]...We would learn a lot more of our language because we have no Inuvialuit teachers here teaching us social studies or English or whatever. Just an Inuvialuit teacher who only teaches the language class. She's a good teacher and we enjoy her...".

In the same way the group members identified their process of learning traditional activities, primarily concerning their relationship with the land, as central to their identity. For example, the members talked about going "out on the land" as one of the high points of their lives in Inuvik; to be out on the land for many meant they were learning to hunt, trap, fish, whale, pick berries, prepare foods, celebrate with family and community, camp out, drum dancing, learning stories about their ancestors and, throughout, building relationships with their family and elders. The bonds of community and family were exemplified in their time out on the land. When asked to identify these bonds the participants identified love, respect, encouragement, celebrations, feasts, rights of passage, tragedy, storytelling, carving and playing games. Most of these aspects of their lives, these bonds to their family and community, were practised when they went out on the land and so we get a sense of the strong connection between identity, land and relationships. In this group many members spent up to two months each summer on the land and others also went on the weekends to the bush camp of an auntie, grandparent or parent. Like the language lessons, the youth in this circle repeatedly expressed a longing for more opportunities to go out and learn. One member summed up the importance of learning by saying how they "enjoy learning about yourself, learning about your people — how they used to live." Further, mixed with the desire to learn about how their ancestors used to live was a realistic integration of modern technologies. For example, one fellow noted the use of the ski-doo instead of dog teams and the use of rifles instead of spears and bows and arrows. This fellow summed up the relationship between modern technology and traditional cultural practices

by stating, "The motives are the same, the methods are different."

Elders were highly respected by this group of young people. At different times over the two-day period the facilitators would ask the group if they wanted to hear from the elders — a man and a woman for the first day and only the woman on day two — who were present in the circle. The response to this question was always a very enthusiastic "Yes!" Throughout the two days the young people also regularly stated that they wanted more time with the elders to learn about their ancestors and the traditions of their people. In the community the ethic of respect for the elders was translated into some very concrete and practical action. The group told the facilitators that respecting their elders meant helping them around their homes by doing errands, helping them get around, and serving them food; it also meant talking to them, listening to them when they speak and serving them first at the feasts and celebrations. Also, in the drum dance the elder plays the drum and sings a story while the younger people dance out the actions to the story — though elders also dance at times.

Dealing with boredom was a significant issue for this group of young people. In the town of Inuvik there was very little for young people to do. A recreation hall had been promised but the project has never come to fruition and it is long overdue. When the facilitator asked if it was easy to get bored in Inuvik there was a very enthusiastic, "Yes!" from the entire group. Members of the group stated they had a choice of activities such as watching television, going to an arcade, going bowling, sports and occasional parties. At one point in the process the group told the facilitator about one of the forms of entertainment in the town for young people: "...sometimes we go to see the bar closing at two o'clock [a.m.]...to see if anybody will fight. Just to watch them fight." In response to the boredom, the participants also stated that many Inuvik youth get into trouble with the law, engage in some violence and gang activity or get into drugs and alcohol. They were able to identify that they felt the boredom in the town and not when they were out on the land; in the same breath, they also stated that they never got out to the land enough.

Other important aspects of their cultural identity in the present included the Northern games — an olympics for northern Aboriginal peoples; square dancing or Red River jigging to fiddle music; music and art festivals.

The Past: Significant Events, People, Places, Experiences

When speaking about the past, the issue that was spoken about the most was the Inuvialuit land claim settlement. One of the more expressive young men in the group stated the following about his memory of the signing:

In Tuktoyaktuk in 1984 [June 5th]. I was there because my dad was working with the COPE [Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement]. He was one of the people who signed the final agreement. I was watching them sign it and after they all got happy and started drum dancing.

This fellow told his account with pride and joyful remembrance, there was no doubt the historic event left a deep impression on his memory. When asked further about what the land claim meant he stated that the Inuvialuit got their land and money back: "It means we can keep our lands. The government can't put in pipe lines or gold mines, things like that, or ruin the caribou harvest or whatever." Later he added that the agreement was for the land and everything on top of the soil and that the government still held the mineral rights; but in his mind, "I'd rather have the land and animals than the minerals...[because] we can still hunt and trap." Hunting and trapping, central to life on the land, were often brought up by group members as a fundamental part of their cultural identity; in this way the land claim settlement was significant.

Still, most of the group members were hesitant even to speak about the land claim and, in large part, they were ambivalent about what it meant in their lives. One of the girls said she knew it was important but that it was so complex she had difficulty explaining why. Another fellow told the facilitators that the Inuvialuit could make a profit from the oil companies by charging them for drilling but when he was asked if he felt this would have an impact on his cultural identity he said, "Not really." Throughout this segment the facilitators asked many questions that were answered with nods or an occasional "Yes." For example the facilitator might ask: "Do you think you will benefit from it personally? Does it give you a sense of power, like you can govern yourself as Inuvialuit?" Perhaps these questions were too complex. The participants in the circle were between 4 and 10 years of age when the agreement was signed and will receive financial benefit only when they turn 18 years of age; even then they receive 100 dollars per year until they are 50 and 500 dollars per year after the age of 50. The young people in the group showed little enthusiasm about this financial settlement which is understandable; in Inuvik this amount of money was hardly remarkable considering a pair of skates costs upward of \$150.

Another important theme for the members of the Inuvialuit youth circle was family. As

part of the discussion format, the facilitator asked everyone in the group to talk about one person, place, event or experience from their past that has influenced their cultural identity; most of the group members identified people in their immediate and extended family who have helped them acquire knowledge and skills from their culture. Here are some examples of how the group responded:

My grandma...she talks a lot about her family and she knows how to speak her language and teaches me how to speak it.... she tells us about her work, she's a politician.

My auntie is my role model because she was always looking after me and she showed me the right way to go.

My uncle Roger because he taught me how to set traps and took me out hunting a lot.

My granny. She speaks fluently in [her language] and she helps me to speak it a little bit.

If they spoke of places, the participants usually identified their family bush camps as the place they spent time with family members and learned about living on the land, for example:

Going out to my grandmother's bush camp...where I can learn to do things the traditional way...how to cut fish and things like that.

When I went out to my Aunt's camp I went hunting with my Aunt Lois...first time I shot a gun.

Going to my family's camp and learning how to fish. And I watch my brothers and uncles cut a whale and I go berry picking — all that.

Other group members identified moving as important events from their past, primarily because they were able to be closer to family members or because they moved further away from family:

When I moved to Inuvik from Alberta and I met my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins...it was important because [before that] I didn't know who they were.

Moving back here from Yellowknife and getting to know all my relatives all over again.... It was kind of hard moving, getting used to everyone here and missing some friends and family in Yellowknife.

Though it was rarely the case, some speakers identified people outside their family who left a significant impact on their identity, for example the person who first began to teach them how to speak their Aboriginal language.

In general the discussion of the past was hesitant, sporadic and brief and it was clear that the facilitators were struggling to inspire the group members to speak more about their experience. When they did speak, the young group participants seemed to be clear about what they perceived and what was important to them.

Barriers: Cultural Identity Denied or Diminished

Racism was the most referred to barrier to the full expression of identity for these boys and girls in Inuvik. The youth group could identify ways they felt they were treated differently from non-Aboriginal people in the stores, by employers, in the school and by the police. In some of the local stores they felt they were treated with suspicion, as if they were going to steal something whenever they entered the premises — "Workers just look at you, stare at you like you're going to rob them or something." In a similar way the business people were able to abuse their position of power in the community through their hiring practices. Of one popular restaurant a girl in the group stated,

It used to be all Aboriginal workers but when they changed management they fired all the workers and hired non-Aboriginal people.

This story seemed to be common knowledge among the group members but they still referred to the store as a popular place to hang around given the limited choice in the town.

At school the youth in this circle felt racism in the way they were treated by the teachers, "differently from the non-Aboriginal students." Further they realized the school provided little in the way of curriculum that catered to their learning interests (such as courses recognizing and feeding their Aboriginal identity) and there were very few Aboriginal teachers working in the institution — "only the janitors are Native!" One girl in the circle told this story of life in one of her classes: "Last year our teacher put all the white people on one side and all the Inuvialuit on the other side and set up the class like that." In the end, the students perceived the school as an unwelcome environment for the expression of their cultural identity for all of these reasons and also for the way other non-Aboriginal students sometimes treat them, for example:

If you learn something in school and you know something [about your own culture] that some non-Aboriginal doesn't know they say, "Oh you're bragging."

...they're jealous cause they don't know.

In situations such as this the youth felt they were denied the ability to share what they knew, to openly express things that they want to. Eventually they end up feeling stifled, like they just want to hold in anything they would like to share.

The type of division that is apparently structured into some of the classes in the school is also visible in the community. The most striking example of the segregation of some areas was expressed by a girl who was trying to depict how parts of the community are perceived by some people:

Another thing is that in town we have friends from different kinds of cultures and the white society might think that if you go beyond the line it's a dirty place and they're going to come back as a savage or something — like all dirty and never shower or bath — they think it's dirty and disgusting. That could be another reason they don't go on the land.

The context for this statement was an examination of why some Inuvialuit don't like to go out on the land even though, in terms of their identity, the group seemed to feel it was one of the most important activities. Clearly, people who go on the land may be perceived as dirty, disgusting or savage by some non-Aboriginal people in Inuvik. One of the participants of the learning circle also stated that "People barely go out on the land because they always get their food from the stores." As well, the Inuvialuit youth identified peer pressure as a significant reason for not going out on the land: "And some don't go out because they don't think it's cool to go on the land."

Some young people are embarrassed to go out on the land or they fear being abandoned by friends in the town if they do go. In short, it wasn't "cool" to go out on the land; it was cool to go drink and get into trouble. Sadly, one of the ways young people get into trouble in Inuvik is gang activity. Apparently there had been a recent rash of gang violence between two groups of young people representing different parts of the community (e.g., east against west). There was also some indication that the gangs were racial in composition.

The ignorance of the general public with respect to Inuvialuit was something that the group felt as oppressive; the levels of ignorance varied as did the way people expressed it. The perceptions that people of the land are savage and disgusting is one example of how lack of understanding has the potential to fuel racism and hatred. Another fellow in the group told the facilitators how he disliked hearing the term 'Eskimo', that it was a degrading term that was long outdated and a clear indication that the person using the term understood little of the Inuvialuit. One other fellow had this story:

This one time when I was overseas...I was being introduced to some people, I went up and told them about myself, told them I was an Inuk from Canada. One guy said he thought I was Filipino or Japanese or something. After I told them I was Inuit they shook my hand and said they never met an Inuit person before.

Though this person's lack of understanding was reasonable given that they live in another part of the world, it was still experienced as oppressive to the young Inuvialuit man in that instance as he was expressing a pride in his identity and ended up feeling unacknowledged or invisible.

Though none of the youth in this group had been to the residential schools, their grandparents had, and they were very clear about the effects of this institution in their lives. When the issue of learning to speak their language came up the participants stated how, of their parents' and grandparents' generation, only some could speak the language. The reasons were very straightforward:

They used to speak their language and then they had to go to residential school and they forgot everything. When they came back they didn't know how to speak their language they only knew how to speak English.

The facilitator asked how they felt the residential school affected them and one girl stated, "...if they can't speak it they can't teach it to us." One of the other girls, who had not previously spoken loudly, said the following in a strong clear voice while her face seemed to express a mixture of anger and sadness: "It's hurting us because we can't communicate with our elders that well." Another girl gave the following example of exactly how this inability to communicate between the generations is manifest in daily life:

Sometimes in drum practice they're talking in their Inuvialuit language and...you don't know what they're saying and you ask them in English and they get mad at you and say you should know the language.

This kind of experience is embarrassing to the youth and it creates a hesitation to seek out and learn the language.

Even if this generation didn't have to go through the residential school system many of them are going to school in another community away from their home and family. In the town of Inuvik there is a hostel for out-of-town Aboriginal students to stay at while they go to school. The students were quick to link the high drop-out rate among Aboriginal students with the fact that many had to leave their families and communities to go to school alone. One of the girls in the group, who was very bright and articulate, was in this exact predicament; when asked if she ever felt like quitting she quickly replied: "Lots of times!" There are strong parallels between the way the residential schools alienated and split families and communities in the past and the way this generation of young Aboriginal people feel the impact of the education system on their lives.

Gambling was another theme that these youths spent considerable time discussing. In Inuvik people — their parents' and grandparents' generation — play cards and bingo; they gamble

in their homes and the stakes reach \$500 to \$1000 at times. When asked how often people played, the group stated in unison: "Every day!" They also said, "Sometimes it goes on for two days", and it becomes difficult to sleep at night because there are many adults socializing in their home. One fellow told the facilitators that he sometimes had to limit his choice of foods for a few days because his parents gambled their food money away and had to wait to get more:

If they gamble all their money they have no money for food! You have to starve until they get some more money.... not really [serious]...sometimes you have to wait for Monday to get some more.... we have food in the house, you just have to eat what's in the house. Like caribou soup.

Another girl in the group felt that the lack of sleep she experienced because of the gambling had this effect on her schooling:

Get up late and you're late for school. Then you pay for it after school by getting a detention. And when you blame it on them they get mad at you... The vice principal says there's no excuses.

The sentiments of this girl were met with nods of agreement from the other members of the group. In terms of their identity, the youth in the group seemed to experience strain in their relationships with their parents because of the addictive nature of the gambling phenomenon in their community. Similarly, alcoholism and drug addiction created similar strains (and sometimes very serious family problems) in their relationships with important adults in their lives. It is likely that unemployment, poverty and boredom all contribute to these addictions and the gambling obsession — though these connections were never directly expressed in the group. Further, and more important, one must consider these addictions as symptoms; to a significant degree they are one repercussion of the colonization and institutionalized racism that has been imposed on generations of Aboriginal people.

Empowerment: Cultural Identity Enhanced or Strengthened

When asked to talk about things that strengthened or enhanced their cultural identity, the group members spoke briefly about their experiences. For the most part they again spoke of how their family members were supportive to them and how parents, uncles, aunts and grandparents taught them how to hunt, fish, gather and prepare food or speak their language. For example:

My grandfather. He was always taking me out hunting and taught me how to talk in Inuvialuit.

My mom. She teaches me Inuvialuit, she always talks to me in the language so I understand some of it.

My Auntie because she help me when I had problems in school. She helped me pass my grades 'cause I asked her for help.

When my family and friends encouraged me to stay here in Inuvik to finish school. (grade 10 girl who wanted to quit school and go back to home community)

My sister helps me with all my problems.

My brother helps me when I'm doing bad in school. He helps me with my math. All of these quotations illustrate the primacy of familial relationships for this group of Inuvialuit teens.

The elders of the community were valued in the same way as family but the focus with the elders was more on their capacity as teachers of history and cultural tradition. Here is one girl's impression: "When you're out at a dance or something, the elders are always teaching you something. You're always learning from your elders."

School was another central part of their lives and one girl, who sometimes appeared uninterested but occasionally provided profound insights, said this strengthened her Aboriginal identity:

When you see more Native students getting higher marks and graduating out of high school.... It makes you want to aim for higher marks and graduate out of school.

Generally, though they expressed the standard adolescent dislike for school, the members in the group valued their education and wanted to transform the curriculum to include more elements of their own culture. Additionally, when speaking of the future, most of them speculated that they would go on to some form of post-secondary education and use their skills in the North.

Among the other things that strengthened their cultural identity, one boy talked about a television program of culturally relevant educational material - "Channel 17 on TV because they have a program about Inuit people and some of them go hunting, camping and stuff." In this isolated northern community television was a significant part of the entertainment options available to the residents — these youth were no exception.

Lastly, some of the other aspects of their lives that the group felt strengthened their identity as Inuvialuit included music and arts festivals; language classes; drum and dance groups; Aboriginal-owned businesses, institutions and assets in the area — for example, one fellow said

that the building the group met in for the two-day learning circle was owned by Inuvialuit; and the Northern Games.

Two Communities: Aboriginal and Mainstream

For this part of the discussion the Inuvialuit youth were asked to visually represent their Aboriginal and mainstream communities using a circle divided into pie shapes that represent the relative influence of each section and their positive or negative emphasis. These are some of the main points that the group members outlined in the exercise; though there are few universals, we also try to give a general idea of the emphasis people placed on each issue:

Aboriginal	Mainstream
employment (+), unemployment (-)	employment (+), unemployment (-)
family and friends: loving and supportive teachers (+), as barriers or unwilling teachers (-), when in conflict (-)	school/teachers: very little Inuvialuit content (-), Inuvialuit classes (+), having to move to another town for school (-), acquiring knowledge and skills for future opportunity (+)
elders (+)	racism (-)
language (+), lack of access/inability to speak (-)	church: place of meeting and spiritual direction (+)
trapping & hunting (+)	stores: choice and convenience (+), when racist (-), adults prefer to traditional foods (-)
drum dancing (+)	RCMP: offer security (+), too controlling and sometimes racist (-)
school: learning focus on Inuvialuit (+), going to school in community (+), racism (-), misinformation (-)	alcohol and drugs (-)
church: place of meeting and learning (+), boring (-)	residential school (-)
team sports (+)	recreation (+), lack of opportunities (-)
living on the land (+)	suicide (-)
land claims (+)	disease: AIDs, STDs, cancer (-)
alcohol and drugs (-)	gangs, fighting (-)
gambling (-)	family and friends (+)
music (+)	travel (+)
recreation (+)	entertainment (+)
festivals (+)	festivals (+)

traditional skills: enjoy learning (+), don't know enough and lack opportunity to learn more (-)	friends: mostly (+) but also a lot of conflict (-)
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The discussion of the two communities was limited to, for the most part, the members of the circle simply listing the different sections of their pie diagrams representing the respective communities and then applying a positive or negative value to each section. When asked whether they felt there was incompatibility between the two communities the participants didn't say very much at all. At times they seemed to indicate that they had accepted the two communities as their reality and felt comfortable moving from one to the other, though most favoured the Aboriginal and none felt more comfortable in the mainstream. Additionally, when asked what they lost in their Aboriginal community in order to feel comfortable with the mainstream, language and traditions was the reply from a couple of the participants.

Recommendations

We, the youth of Inuvik, recommend the following:

1. That Aboriginal teachers design, develop and implement more culturally relevant courses.
2. That Aboriginal people develop historically accurate information about our people.
3. That there be an increase in educational funding to provide on-the-land programs to teach youth their Aboriginal language, traditional skills and other cultural activities.
4. That elders be used more in the school system as support staff.
5. That more Aboriginal people from the community be recruited and hired as teachers within in the school system.
6. That more language classes be offered within the school so the youth can learn their language more quickly.
7. The establishment of a cultural/recreation centre for the youth, using elders as teachers in this setting.
8. That an alcohol treatment centre, including a detox centre and adolescent treatment unit, be designed, developed and implemented in Inuvik.
9. That there be a locally developed curriculum to address the high drop-out rate of Aboriginal students.

10. That within each community in the North there be a school that offers all levels up to grade 12 so students don't have to leave their home town to get a high school education.
11. That more circles, such as the cultural identity learning circle, be held for youth to discuss the issues that are important to them.

Conclusions

The facilitators of the Inuvialuit youth group left feeling disappointed that the group of young participants in the learning circle were not able to open up fully and discuss the issues of cultural identity with less inhibition. One has to consider the developmental level of these people — adolescents, often a time of immense identity confusion — and wonder whether another format would have been more favourable or if the issues were simply too complex for them to engage in more fully. With more life experience would they feel the weight of their identity more profoundly and have more to say? It is difficult to speculate.

Even with the seemingly apprehensive investment in the learning circle these young people did leave some important messages with the Royal Commission. What was perhaps most impressive was their desire to learn about the traditions of their culture, life on the land and their language. The group also consistently and universally showed a genuine hunger to listen to the elders' stories in order to learn about themselves and their ancestors — this passion was the active expression of all they were stating verbally with respect to their will to learn.

In contrast, one of the sadder themes throughout the two days was the boredom they felt in the town of Inuvik where they felt there was a lack of youth-oriented facilities given the number of young people living there. It seemed that the tedium they felt was a potentially detrimental force that dampened their spirits and turned some of the youth in the town to acts of self-destruction and violence.

In the end, it becomes clear there is a sensitive balance these young people try to maintain in their lives: life on the land is exciting and productive, there is lots for them to do and learn about themselves and their ancestry. Life in the town is boring and leads people to destructive and anti-productive behaviour but it is a place where they get education, employment and services that are also important to their lives. Most of the youth in this group have grown up in the town so it is as fundamental to their identity as their trips to the family bush camp; the ongoing tension of this balancing act is the lifeblood of their attempts to define who they are and how they will live their lives.

At one point late in the learning circle there was an exchange that highlighted the dilemma these young people face. The facilitator asked people about their future aspirations and after some discussion summed up some of the responses given by the group. Then the facilitator asked why nobody said they wanted to pass on their Aboriginal traditions. With a mix of thinly concealed anger and frustration one of the girls said, "Because they weren't passed down to us!" Upon further enquiry the girl stated what she thought was the reason for this: "'Cause some of us are more in the mainstream society."

"Is that by choice?" asked the facilitator.

"No. It just happened that way."

Appendix 6 — Descriptive Analysis of the Halifax Women's Learning Circle

The Halifax women's learning circle took place at the Micmac Friendship Centre in a small room with no windows or air circulation. By the end of the first day there were fans blowing in the background to try to reduce the temperature. In all there were 12 women, ranging in age from 25 to 45; the participants were of Mi'kmaq, Maliseet and Cree heritage. The women were articulate when there was ample opportunity to express themselves, but parts of the group process entailed simply listing information as the facilitator, at times, was rushing to meet the time constraints of the two-day group.

The Present: Core Elements of Cultural Identity

Family, community and spirituality seemed to be the dominant themes of the discussion highlighting core elements of identity in the present. The first speaker, a young Cree woman from Saskatchewan who had lived in Halifax for 6 years, brought all of these themes together as she described to the group the emerging sense of spirituality that is part of her life now. Holding a sacred talking stick for strength, she told the group in a voice that quivered with emotion,

...my spiritual side is awakening...I'm in the process of going to the next level now. Lately I'm having a lot of spiritual dreams where I see elders, I see eagles...I see colours. I guess just by my whole past, I've been living in the city since I was very young...and the evil of living in the city [the speaker lived on the streets of Saskatoon and Halifax for a number of years since the age of 13]. I'm beginning to find my spiritual side. I guess it is almost scary to go to that spiritual side because in the city you don't have the support. You don't have access to someone right away. You would have to go to the reserve and make arrangements or find someone here in the city. I usually come to the centre and talk to the staff about anything I have. I feel I don't have [these supports] in the city, I feel lost.... I do feel lost now with my cultural identity. Even though I see a little bit of it and I can get a grip of it sometimes, I don't have that solid grounding that I need.

A lot of times I phone home...to Saskatchewan and ask my sister to go and see my grandfather for me. And I tell him what I'm experiencing in my dreams, what I see in my dreams or how I feel. And then that's a security that I get, knowing my grandfather will help me even though he is five provinces away from me. Just knowing that he will listen to me and take what I have seriously.

And I feel like that's what I don't have in the city — I don't have that security that I need.... It's slowly going away though...because I've learned to trust people here in a different way too. Like I can trust my family unconditionally and I'm just learning to trust everybody here. I've been here 6 years now and I've really got involved in the Mi'kmaq community. I don't really see myself as being Cree any more; I see myself as being with the Mi'kmaq community. So I'm just

learning to trust even the elders out here.... I believe that some people are, like me, just learning; and it's hidden away somewhere but it's starting to surface. That's the way I feel with my own spiritual side, that it's slowly coming to surface. It is only showing me little things at a time.

This quotation is rich with information about the speaker's struggle to integrate the lessons learned from her family in her youth with the needs of her present life in a contemporary urban setting. The reference point to understand her spiritual life is the fundamental teachings she received from her Cree grandfather. Her story also articulates the immense challenge of re-establishing a nurturing community away from home within an often inhospitable mainstream cultural milieu, a challenge that most urban Aboriginal people face.

The role of family that was expressed by the first speaker was also something that other women referred to. One woman said succinctly, "I am my mother's daughter. And she's passed on to me what her mother has passed on to her, and so on and so on. So I have a real strong sense [of identity]." Yet another woman identified how relearning about family through her process of healing from childhood sexual abuse was central to her conception of her Aboriginal identity:

For me it was learning to identify that I was a woman and where you fit in as a sister, as a daughter, I can't say mother yet because I have no children. But just where you fit in and your place, knowing what your expectations are. I spent a lot of time talking to my father...and understanding...going back and looking at why he treated me like this and how we can build a relationship. Because for the longest time we didn't have a relationship. So, overcoming the issues and making myself aware of what is expected from me in my family and knowing my role a bit more. When I started dealing with my issues I didn't feel like I fit into the family. I didn't feel like I fit into the reserve. I didn't feel like I fit into the Catholic religion. When I started dealing with my issues my father told me to be proud of who I was...to study my ancestors. I started looking at how to even be a sister to my sister. How to be a daughter to my mother. And knowing our roles and responsibilities, how do I talk to my mother? How do I talk to my grandmother? What do I expect from her? What do I expect from my brothers? How do I treat my brothers? And what kind of woman would I be for becoming a parent? I envisage or see myself in a certain way and I have to deal with those issues before I can even become a mother. Or feel worthy of becoming a mother. Or how to be close to another woman. And how to share. And how to talk to one another. And how not to disrespect each other. Friendship. Relearning all those things. I say relearn because when you are abused everything gets all fucked up. Sorry to be so blunt but everything gets totally out of whack that you don't know how to be happy with yourself or where you fit in anywhere.

These words are a vivid portrayal of the painstaking process of healing and building one's identity starting within the context of the most rudimentary relationships in her life — these are the building blocks of her identity. This same woman spoke about the important role her

community plays in her identity formation. Though she expressed anger and frustration toward the community, stating she lives in the urban centre because it is too difficult to live in the community now, she also spoke of the importance of maintaining links to the community to learn about her Aboriginal identity. For example, she regularly returns to consult with elders, to attend ceremonies, to go to the sweatlodge, for family gatherings, to vote in the band political issues, to take part in talking circles and other important events of this nature.

Outside of the central themes of family, community and spirituality, the women also listed many other aspects of their Aboriginal identity that were important to them: language, storytelling, legends, customs, traditions, land and ocean, respect for nature, sharing, simplicity of lifestyle, the talking stick and gift giving.

The Past: Significant Places, People, Events, Programs

The discussion on the ancestral/historical/personal background as it relates to cultural identity was intended to bring out important events from the past in people's lives that significantly affected their Aboriginal identity. One young woman spoke about leaving her reserve after high school; at that time she was anxious to get away and she went to a conference in Toronto about community development on reserves.

I found before I went to Toronto I had this attitude, like I'm getting off my reserve, I'm getting away from these people, just taking off and not coming back. And I was very pleased that I took the time out to go to Toronto because I found...that their culture was so strong. The way they dressed and everything, it was so strong. It made me feel like an outcast.... This conference...was designed to let you know that dreams do come true. It makes you look at your people in a different light. I was glad I had that experience. I wish everybody my age could have...seen it with that same attitude. It had a big impact on my life and where I was looking for my future. Instead of negative and getting right out of there [home community]... I found that was really important.... It was the Canadian Council for Native Business.

For this person, as with others, it is only in hindsight that they see how events created an unexpected change in their sense of identity as an Aboriginal person. Another woman had a similar experience with a job; when she took the work she had no idea how profound an impact it would have on her feelings about being an Aboriginal person. At a conference that brought together many great Aboriginal leaders, chiefs, elders and medicine people,

It was my job for three days to take care of all these elders...to listen to them, talk to them, give them tea, moosemeat, whatever would make them happy. I did it

because it was my job but I came away from it feeling gratified because I've learned of my spirituality. There was something there I never knew before.... The remarkable things this man would talk about... He told me that I would leave my reserve for many years but I would come back with a great sense of responsibility to help my people. And now that's what I do because we recently established a community court system there. And that's my job, to help all my community members in the best Native way we know how.

Here again an unexpected event became a major turning point in a person's life. In a similar way the women looked at some events from their past that were, at the time, very dangerous or harmful to them but in the long run they converted these terrible experiences into positive lessons and survival skills for themselves and others. One of the best examples of this was a woman who left home at 13 and lived on the street in Saskatoon until she was 19 or 20. She told the group about some aspects of her life on the street, about the people who protected her on the streets — her street family — and she stated that at 20 her mother and step-father rescued her from the street. In retrospect she stated that many of her old street friends were dead now and so she was glad to have changed her life so immensely with a stable family and job. Still, she said that she was on the street because she was sexually abused and her mother wouldn't let her talk about "that stuff". For her, there was nobody in the community she could go to for help and she felt safer on the street — which was a very violent place, but safer. In retrospect,

I feel like I've changed into a totally different person. And yet all those experiences that I went through...growing up — being sexually abused and living on the street — all these different experiences have helped me grow into...a stronger person because now I can relate to people in so many different ways. It seems like I've opened new doors for myself in ways to help other people. To me those experiences are...very sacred to me, even though they weren't always good experiences, they were something I've learned and I've walk away with knowledge from.... All those things that happened to me that were negative before are positive now because I am turning it around and helping people who are now in that situation. Now I have girls coming to me who are being physically abused or sexually abused and...they feel safe with me because they know I have been through it.

Like other women who have lived through difficult and perilous life circumstances, she has successfully converted the past into a productive life in the present that is grounded in a firm sense of identity and purpose. One way these women build strength in their identity and heal from the past is to come together in healing circles; more than one participant brought up the importance of a regular women's healing circle at the Mi'kmaq centre. In the words of the woman

who survived the streets of Saskatoon and Halifax, "I feel like [the healing circle] is helping me gain the security I need here."

A significant part of the discussion on events from the past that influenced cultural identity concerned the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP) raid on the Mi'kmaq community of Restigouche in 1981. (There is a National Film Board documentary on this issue called "Incident at Restigouche".) The police takeover of the community entailed confiscation of fish and fishing equipment, intimidation of the people in the community, the curtailment of communication links out of the community and round the clock surveillance by police officers on the ground and in the air by helicopter. Two women in this learning circle were from Restigouche and together they expressed the frustration, rage and despair that they felt throughout this ordeal and how these feelings remain deeply ingrained in their identity as Aboriginal women. Other women added their own stories of police misconduct with Aboriginal people to the discussion of Restigouche. (This issue is reviewed in the next section.)

Past experiences — almost universally negative — in education environments was another weighty theme that these women focused on. With respect to language, one woman told the group how her parents never taught her the Mi'kmaq language because the school would not allow her to speak it at school so her parents felt it was better to speak English to her. This women expressed a great sense of loss at her inability to speak the language of her ancestors. Another young woman felt that the racism that was directed at her by other children in the school playground as a child was devastating to her identity formation. This woman told the group how she would go home in tears after being victimized by racist taunts by the other children because of her Cree heritage. Her anger and confusion today are focused on her father who always told her to be proud of being Cree: "I couldn't understand why he would say that.... He left me with a lot of unanswered questions." This women told the group that though she has spent much of her life distanced from her Cree ancestry, she has recently begun to investigate and develop that side of her identity. Other group members echoed the sense of regret because their Aboriginal parents never exposed them to the language and teachings of their ancestors; for many, this sense of regret has been converted into a determination to find out more today.

Barriers: Aspects of Cultural Identity Diminished or Denied

The women of the Halifax learning circle talked about many different barriers to their cultural identity. Much of the discussion focused on three mainstream institutions: the government, the Catholic church and the justice system. Another significant theme was the racism they experienced from employers. All of these forces played a role in significantly diminishing or denying aspects of what these women felt was their Aboriginal identity.

More than most of the learning circles, this group focused on the role of the Catholic church in their communities as it has created destructive divisions among the people who live there. After leaving high school and university one woman began to learn more about Aboriginal people and the history of colonization; this new information compelled her to question why she was Catholic if that religion is not a part of her cultural heritage. These types of questions left her feeling confused about her identity; but they also heightened her desire to learn more. Now she says that she will go to church with her mother, who is a strong Catholic, to avoid hurting her; but in her own life the woman said she no longer considered herself a practising Catholic. The theme of familial division was common for the women in the circle. For another woman:

I was brought up on a reserve with strong catholicism — I left young because I didn't know who I was or what I was doing. When I left the reserve I began to learn more about Native spirituality; I find it odd that you have to leave the reserve to find out more about yourself. I'm still confused about what spirituality is. I kind of dislike the Catholic church, the more I am off the reserve the more I learn about the things they've done to Native people, the more it just kind of causes a lot of anger inside just to think of what they've done to us and how it is still affecting us...and it's coming back, it's still a continuous thing...so I am still a confused person. My reserve is in the city and so we are surrounded by non-Natives and that kind of blends in and limits the information [spiritual, cultural]... They are trying to do more things like pow wows and stuff, but the Catholic church is still involved in it so that makes me angry and I stay away. I don't bother getting involved because it will just cause conflict with the people who are still involved with the Catholic church — for example, my grandmother is still a strong Catholic. When I read books and articles about the residential school it just angers me. I have family, an aunt, who is a nun — what am I supposed to do? If I defy the Catholic church then I am defying my family.

The division also affected the community in general. The women in the group identified two poles of a continuum within the community: one pole is those who are devoted Catholics and the other is the people who identify with traditional beliefs about morality, spirituality and life. For example, there are elders who are respected by both sides of the continuum but who are devout Catholics; these people were viewed as espousing a spirituality that showed integrity, a

spirituality that also reflected the traditional Aboriginal ideals. About these people one woman stated: "I do respect some elders who are Catholics but what they teach us is their own spirit not Catholicism."

At one point in the lengthy emotional discussion on the church the facilitator asked the group if they thought the church was abusive either emotionally, physically, mentally or sexually with Aboriginal people and many of the group members stated in unison: "All of it!" To this list of abuses the group added cultural abuse as they were given the message — in the school and in the church — that they were worthless if they maintained their own culture, that they would have to become part of the mainstream culture as prescribed by the church to gain salvation or simply to be worthy human beings. One woman stated that she lost faith in the church upon observing that the priests, nuns, brothers and others associated with the church lived their own lives in a way that was contrary to the moral code they were preaching to the Aboriginal people in the community. For some group members the Catholic church was synonymous with residential schools which had a devastating impact on the Aboriginal identity of generations their families and communities. Another speaker identified how the church's teachings on predestination ran counter to the healing process from an abusive childhood:

The church teaches that...your life is already destined, you're preordained by the time you are born, what you are going to be like, what is going to happen to you...like blind faith — it was meant to happen...if something happened to you, it was going to happen anyway — God had predicted your future — if you were going to be abused than that's your role.

On this same issue one other speaker stated with anger and certainty that when it came time for her to heal from the abuse she suffered in her childhood she found what she needed from the Mi'kmaq spiritual teachings and elders, not from the Catholic church.

One other constraint on the Aboriginal identity of many participants in this group was the police. Two women who came from the community of Restigouche told about their experiences during a police raid of their community in 1981 over fishing issues. The women remembered how the QPP raided houses, confiscated fishing equipment and fish, sand-bagged the community, cut off communications and carried out full-scale intimidation on the members of the community. Both remembered the rage and terror they felt during the ordeal; they also spoke of how powerless they felt in the face of this monumental exhibition of cultural suppression and racism. Both women repeatedly expressed their rage and utter disbelief while telling their stories. One of the women summed up the experience saying the QPP "showed no respect, no dignity, for

anyone — for our culture, the way we lived — it was just a power trip for the QPP." Most group members compared this raid to the events at Oka in the summer of 1990.

Another highly significant police and justice system related story from Nova Scotia was the Donald Marshall inquiry. One woman in the circle worked with Aboriginal people in the justice system — she felt that her job existed partly because of the Donald Marshall inquiry findings. This woman summarized the findings of the inquiry by stating that Donald Marshall was clearly an innocent scapegoat who stayed behind bars for 10 years and that the police knew all along that he was only a stand-in for the person who committed the crime; still, they continued to cover up. This case was another example of the abuse of power coupled with institutional racism that has diminished the identity of Aboriginal people.

Lastly, a woman in the circle told the group how she was once the victim of police officers who abused their position of power by simply charging into her house without her permission. After the incident this woman decided to go to a provincial justice organization to report the episode; there she was told that she should not bother to continue with her case because she would not be successful in the end. This speaker expressed her sense of powerlessness and belief that Aboriginal people do not have access to the justice and respect that other people take for granted.

The government was identified by the Halifax women as another major restriction to freely expressing Aboriginal identity. Over the two-day period participants explained how the government touched on many different aspects of their lives in a way that diminished their sense of identity. For example, at one point in the discussions a woman stated that told the Commission that there was a building across the street from the MicMac Friendship Centre in downtown Halifax called the Cornwallis building. Group members told the story about how Cornwallis, who was a politician, legislated a bounty for the scalps of Aboriginal people — different price ranges depending on the age of the person scalped. As one speaker put it: "So they still honour that and it diminishes who you are. Because they are saying `you are not worthy of anything and we are still going to honour this non-Native person who...[wanted]...to scalp every Native around." As these words convey, it was a disgrace to the Aboriginal women in this group that the mainstream society publicly honours a person who is the originator of such a horrific expression of genocide; this knowledge alone was diminishing to their sense of Aboriginal identity — it was a dark irony that such an imposing monument to this person stood just outside the doors of the

Friendship Centre.

The group also talked about how the government censors identity simply by defining the membership of Aboriginal people through the *Indian Act* regulations. These regulations create barriers and divisions within the Aboriginal community and the members of the group expressed anger that the act, created by non-Aboriginal people, effectively separated them from their families, their communities and their culture. Further, the assimilationist intent of the act left them with degrading messages to be something they are not — such as "a good white girl". This was hurtful and deprived these people of the fundamental recognition of who they are; it also denied them a sense of belonging to the culture that is rightfully theirs. One poignant example of how the *Indian Act* imposed divisions within reserve communities was expressed by a woman frustrated by the patriarchy that is indicative of mainstream power structures. She identified the tension many educated Aboriginal woman face within the existing political culture of the band:

We have a lot of male people who are in politics who are the leaders in the community — who are not educated. You've got a lot of women who are educated, getting the training, living in urban areas. When they want to go back home the male population doesn't want these people to go back home because the majority...are getting educated. So it is that struggle between the men on the reserve who are not educated and the women who are educated and trying to find a place for themselves within that community — the power struggles between the gender and education and training is always there. So it's no wonder that Native people are not going to encourage women to come home to work in the community because they are scared to lose their jobs.

This dynamic is also a repercussion of the effects of sexual discrimination in the *Indian Act*, which forced many women off the reserve after marriage to non-Aboriginal men. Now some of these women are trying to return to a community that no longer welcomes them. This woman also stated how she felt a sense of bitterness that her reserve community did not welcome her back to use her new skills after she obtained post-secondary education. In her experience, if you return home you have to spend the first year volunteering in as many community initiatives as possible in order to prove yourself worthy of paid work. Even the pay is lower than in urban centres, with the rationalization that it is tax-free so you are actually getting more — when in fact you are getting the same or less than you would elsewhere.

In general racism and sexual discrimination were phenomena that the women had experienced in their lives as disempowering for their sense of identity. One example given by a participant focused on getting a bank loan. In this woman's experience an Aboriginal person

could work hard to establish a good credit rating and everything would go well in the loan interview until the bank manager found out that your residence was on the reserve — "It just blows the whole thing. It's a stereotype situation."

Racism seemed to be commonly experienced in situations of employment where the women often felt powerless to do anything about it — sometimes because it was very subtle and would be difficult to prove and at other times because they feared for their livelihood. One woman told the group that at one hotel where her brother-in-law worked, "they won't put anybody in the front who looks Native.... They don't have Native people or any nations represented in the hotel working as people who are visible." Another speaker linked the oppression of racism with experiences of sexism; her words suggest that cultural pride and support have helped her overcome the persecution: "I know where I belong. The heart is there. I feel close to my people — any Native person, not only my own community — people anywhere — I have had many negative experiences in the city because I am an Indian and a woman but they aren't going to chase me away." Members spoke about how even with employment equity programs there is often little support beyond simply hiring an Aboriginal person who is then in a position of isolation.

Lastly, a member of the circle told the group of her experience working for the government:

I worked for the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission and I noticed when I worked there that a lot of people come in and complain — the majority of them were black. Not once did I see a Native person come in there and complain. And it's because they are used to this. They don't see no sense in complaining any more.

Clearly there is a pervasive despair about the mainstream culture's ability to respond to incidents of racism perpetrated against Aboriginal people, as expressed by these women.

Outside of the main issues already outlined the women developed a long list of specific parts of their identity that were diminished or they felt deprived of in the urban setting. The list was diverse and included language, healthy parenting skills, traditional teachings, cultural ceremony and ritual, freedom, a meeting place for spiritual activity, access to elders, culturally relevant curriculum in schools, Aboriginal representation on school boards and Aboriginal businesses.

Empowerment: Cultural Identity Strengthened or Enhanced

For these urban Aboriginal women, and many other people who spoke in other learning circles, the decision to leave the reserve community was a major change in their lives. There seemed to be a constant balancing act between living life in the city and maintaining links to one's home community. One woman in this circle was quite happy to have left the small community where she grew up as it was confining for her in many different ways. In her introduction she stated that coming to the city was a "big slap in the face" with respect to culture; still, exposure to other cultures taught her to have pride in her own. In this passage she expresses her feelings about what she likes most about living in the urban centre:

When I started to build my own strength and my own identity...who I am as an individual. That really strengthened me, all these differences, it was overwhelming for me at first but now I've got more perspective and I'm stronger for it. And now I go back to the reserve. I know more...I feel more of what it is to be an Indian when I go back to the reserve...because I have been discriminated and depressed and deprived in ways that they haven't been. They're protected on the reserve. The only time they go off the reserve is to eat and go play bingo [laughs]...It's a culture shock just to leave the reserve.... You're not only learning that there are differences but you are building your identity on who you are and what you are. And either you turn against your culture and deny that you're Indian and try to assimilate or you can accept that you're Indian and you can still live in the city and...be a stronger person for it.

Later she added to her analysis.

Leaving the oppressive state of the reserve, at times, and moving to the city really helped me! I'm not living in that oppressive state. I can go home, I can visit, I can leave, I can live my life here. I'm not forced to live in that depressive state anymore. If I want to choose to go back it's up to me. But I'm not forced to move back. Here in the city I'm still an Indian. I am who I am ...I'm a better person now than before. The city is really [liberating]. You are very limited on the reserve...you are what people want you to be, you are what people accept you to be...you're within bounds. Living in the city, we all know what it is like to leave your community. You are still a part of your community but you are not oppressed by your community.

Many of the women expressed a bittersweet relationship with their reserve communities; for most there was no question they wanted to maintain this important link but they also wanted to have the ability to control the amount of influence it had in their lives. This control was usually accomplished by living in the urban centre and going back to visit when they felt the need. One speaker who stated, "I moved from Montreal to here, not just to be with Native people but to be with Mi'kmaq people," was exercising precisely this sort of control as she earlier told

the group how living in the Mi'kmaq community in Halifax was as close as she could be to her home community because of the anger and frustration she feels about that community for different reasons.

For yet another speaker living in the city while parenting young children was a push to work to learn more about her Aboriginal identity:

I find bringing your children up in the city, you want to grasp some of your culture and pass it on to your children. With my little guy I find that if there is pow wows close by I'm taking him right there. 'Cause he's really into them. And maybe if I was on the reserve I wouldn't try to push for that so much.

More than one participant brought up the issue of children as very positive strengthening influences for Aboriginal identity. For example, two women stated that one of the most important events in their lives was aiding in the birth of a child.

Within the city the women stated that the Micmac Friendship Centre and all the programs it offers was one of the most important resources for them to nurture their Aboriginal identity. Perhaps it was because the group was held at the centre, but all the women seemed to hold it in high esteem as a critical focal point for Aboriginal people in Halifax. Some of the specific programs and services that the participants of this circle found empowering were the adult education upgrading, the talking circle, the life skills program, the newsletter, the counsellors, the information access and the social and cultural functions that are promoted and organized through the centre. In a similar vein, one woman talked about the importance of personal development and support through women's groups, support groups, counselling groups; she felt strengthened in her identity by using these groups for, in her words, "creating your own extended family" in the urban centre. This same idea was expressed another way by this speaker: "When we started the healing circle, just being able to deal with your issues in the city. Like, not having to go onto the reserve; setting up a support system in city."

Some women in this learning circle found it strengthening to simply witness mainstream societal shifts in the treatment and portrayal of Aboriginal people; for example, a court worker stated that this type of change was evident in the justice system "...because Native people are beginning to be recognized within the justice system; we aren't being shunted away anymore." Another example of a change was in the media, one participant felt that seeing more positive portrayals, in the form of accurate documentaries and educational programming, was something that reinforced her sense of identity.

Some of the other important points raised in the discussion focusing on things that strengthen identity in the city were Aboriginal subsidized housing and community kitchen (Tawaak); transitional year university preparation program for Black and Aboriginal people; demonstrations and protests that bring the whole urban Aboriginal community together; conferences, training and workshops that contribute to cultural awareness; drum groups; spiritual prayer group; "working with Native people and for Native people" in various capacities; band meetings; meeting elders in city — to learn how to maintain the culture and incorporate balance with the mainstream culture; and working for progressive employers (in one woman's words, "somebody who could allow you to do what you want in your work...being non-Native he who could still understand what it is like to be Native and...he lets you be the voice for Native people. So he gives you the flexibility and support.") Though this list is not exhaustive, it does cover much of the information shared by this group of women.

Two Communities: Aboriginal and Mainstream

This chart shows some of the aspects of the two communities that the Halifax women included in the circle representations they sketched for this activity comparing the Aboriginal and mainstream community influences in their lives.

Aboriginal	Mainstream
family: support, love and learning (+), abusive (-)	employment (+), unemployment (-)
community: supportive environment with cultural resources and important people (+), stifling and oppressive (-)	education: accurate, relevant and authentic (+), knowledge and skills (+), inaccurate and racist (-)
school: accurate, relevant and authentic (+), useful knowledge and skills (+), inaccurate and racist (-)	racism/discrimination (-)
land (+)	friends and family (+)
alcohol and drug abuse (-)	drug and alcohol abuse (+)
elders (+)	poverty (-)
language: ability to speak (+), lack of access to (-)	gender: as a source of pride and affiliation (+), as a source of oppression (-)
church: as a source of spiritual direction (+), a meeting place (+), a place of celebrating rites of passage (+)	government: controlling (-), supportive (+)

friendship centre (+)	friendship centre (+)
spirituality (+)	cultural shock (-)
poverty (-)	security, sense of belonging (+)
friends (+)	different time perception (-)
employment: as source of sustenance, contribution and esteem (+); when inaccessible (-); racism and harassment (-)	justice/court system: discrimination and racism (-), recent changes with respect to Aboriginal people (+)
traditional skills, e.g., hunting, fishing, arts and crafts (+)	Christian celebrations: as a time of gathering with family and community (+), overshadowing or replacing important Aboriginal celebrations (-)
cultural celebrations and festivals (+)	living off reserve: as liberation (+), isolation (-)
abusive relationships (-)	dominance of English language (+)
divorce: liberation from a bad situation (+), painful loss (-)	music, art, literature (+)
traditional food (+)	pro-Aboriginal and women's political organizations and events (+)
traditional clothing (+)	entertainment/recreation (+)

In the discussion comparing the two communities the women in the circle expressed the panorama of feelings about their place in the two worlds. For example, more than one woman rejected the mainstream in favour of the Aboriginal community as they felt more comfortable or at home there; the mainstream did not offer the same degree of comfort and seemed to require too much of a compromise of some speakers. About the days when she left the reserve to find a better life, one of the older women stated the following:

I feel that I had all the riches I needed right at home, and I didn't have to go out there to look. After you got out there you found out there was really nothing out there. Everything that you cherished and you learned and you needed, you already had...what you found to be important was in your Aboriginal community.

Clearly this woman felt no need to assimilate into the larger society to find contentment. Other women expressed similar thoughts and feelings about the Aboriginal community. One speaker had been working in the urban Aboriginal community for 14 years and consciously rejected involvement in the mainstream community because she never felt a strong sense of her place there; in the Aboriginal community she knew her role and the expectations that governed her actions — this knowledge was liberating to her. Another speaker who was also expressing the

tension she feels within mainstream society talked about knocking on doors before entering people's houses. Specifically, she expressed feelings of impatience and futility when waiting for people to respond to your knock (in the city) because this is something she doesn't contend with in her reserve community as it is not a custom to knock before entering a person's house.

Another perspective in the discussion was expressed by women who felt comfortable in both communities. Commonly, the women's statements echoed this speaker: "I guess I feel the same with both communities... Within the Aboriginal community I feel I could go back but as well I feel welcome in the mainstream society because I've gotten accustomed to it...I still belong in the Native community but I feel like I belong here as well." One other woman identified the internal process she goes through depending on the community she finds herself; clearly there are skills to living bi-culturally:

I can shift into different...almost different modes. When I'm in a certain group I know that I can't do certain things and I can't say certain things. When I am in another group I can do things and I can say things. So... it's almost like having a double personality. When I am with my husband and my in-laws I have to act a different way almost. But it doesn't deprive me in any way. It doesn't make me feel bad for having to go into that...I think it is still positive.

A twist on this view was that, although comfortable with both communities, there seemed to be a stronger sense of loyalty to the Aboriginal community. One woman told the group how she made her life in the mainstream of the city but with the intent of using her knowledge and skills for her Aboriginal community:

I've got my mainstream circle bigger because I felt that I gained more knowledge here, getting employed, everything that circumferenced me in my life came from here but I am able to take that home, what I've learned, through my knowledge. And now I am able to use it there. Whereas before I wasn't able to because I had nothing when I was there.

Many of the speakers expressed positive feelings about being able to obtain education, skills and employment in the mainstream that they could not get in their Aboriginal community.

At the other end of the spectrum in the discussion of the two communities was one woman who felt more comfortable in the mainstream community. She felt that there was nothing for her life on the reserve except her family and the occasional cultural event. Her view of the city was that she felt more accepted for the choices she made in her life and that there were far more resources with which to act on the choices she made; in contrast the reserve was a very stifling place with nothing to do and too many social expectations that confined her life.

Recommendations

1. Replace the *Indian Act* with a document that will not discriminate against future generations of our children. With respect to the new document: (a) Aboriginal people will be involved in the review, design and development; (b) the document will be inclusive of all Aboriginal people; (c) only the Creator and Aboriginal peoples have the right to define our membership; others can only recognize this fact.
2. An accurate account of history be researched, developed and implemented by Aboriginal people. The history would cover the contributions of Aboriginal people from pre-contact with European settlers to the present. The first stage of implementation would focus on changing textbooks, history books and other reference material at all levels of education. A second stage of implementation would be the promotion and use of this information by all Aboriginal peoples and their communities.
3. Information concerning cultural issues of Aboriginal people be replaced with updated and accurate information that is developed by Aboriginal peoples.
4. To eliminate the racism and discrimination directed at Aboriginal people in Canada, Aboriginal educators should design, develop and implement culturally relevant courses, curriculum and programs for use in all school systems.
5. Aboriginal people who want to learn their language should be given the opportunity to learn and pass it on to future generations. Further, Aboriginal languages should be mandatory at elementary levels and optional in secondary school systems.
6. Clarify the federal and provincial human rights agencies' jurisdiction so that human rights abuses directed to Aboriginal people can be dealt with in a clear and consistent manner. Further, this initiative should include the development of support and encouragement of Aboriginal people to report human rights violations to the appropriate agency; this initiative could begin with a simple handbook that explains the procedure.
7. That rights, resources and benefits pertaining to people living off-reserve be granted in manner equal to those living on-reserve — this should apply to all Aboriginal people.
8. That a protective mechanism such as an office or legal agency of Aboriginal peoples be created and developed, by Aboriginal people, to ensure all legislation being passed by Parliament in no way infringes on the rights of Aboriginal people.
9. That healing centres be established with appropriate resources (federally funded) to provide accessible services to all Aboriginal people in the urban centre; these centres would include focus on personal and family development and counselling using traditional healing methods.
10. Acknowledgement by the church, the government and any other agency involved in the cultural genocide of Aboriginal people through, for example, institutions such as the residential schools, adoptions or foster care system. As well, the following research

should be undertaken: (a) investigations into the deaths of children attending the schools including a full and accurate explanation to the parents of those children; (b) investigation into the injuries suffered through multiple forms of abuse whether physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, sexual; (c) inquiry into the premature deaths of the adult survivors of these institutions; and (d) that sufficient resources be available to children of these institutions who wish to reunite with their families.

11. In consideration of 10, a safe healing place should be established for the survivors and their children that allows them to deal with the deep emotional traumas resulting from the abuses.

12. Learning circles be promoted and used to develop awareness and healing for Aboriginal people.

Conclusions

Among the issues specific to the Halifax women's circle was the Catholic church's role in the Aboriginal communities that many of these women came from. It is safe to say that these women had little to say about the church that was positive when speaking about their identity. In fact, when speaking about the forces in their lives that have most significantly denied aspects of their identity the Catholic church was one of the most destructive institutions for themselves, their families and communities as it is responsible for creating deep-seated conflict and division for generations of these people.

Some women in the Halifax group expressed anger at their reserve community and the patriarchal political system that governs the band. In part, it is a backlash from the introduction of Bill C-31 that leaves these women frustrated in their attempts to take part in the political life of the community that they have been excluded from for so long. It is no wonder that speakers spoke about leaving reserve as a good thing because it enabled them to maintain an arm's-length relationship with the community — a relationship they could control, for the most part, allowing them to come and go as they saw fit.

The issue of abuse was another area that different speakers addressed as part of their past and the centre of their present healing efforts. For some women surviving childhood abuses was exactly the reason they felt so much anger at their family and community members; it is also the reason they choose to maintain a peripheral place in their community life. In the end there is an ongoing tension played out in their sense of identity. There is the anger, rejection and pain over childhood victimization but at the same time there is a willingness to remain connected to their community as a source of support and strength for their identity.

Appendix 7 — Descriptive Analysis of the Saskatchewan Treaty Learning Circle

The Saskatchewan treaty learning circle was made up of 14 participants — seven females and seven males — ranging in age from 16 to 68. (One man left the group in the afternoon of the first day and two other men did not return for day two.) The nations represented by the group included Dakota, Saulteaux, Dakota Sioux, Cree and Blackfoot.

The Present: Core Aspects of Cultural Identity

Some of the specific values at the core of group members' cultural identity identified in the group were summed up by this man's words:

I've also heard the values in our language we refer to them as spirits. They talk about honesty, kindness, sharing, faith, humility — one of the greatest values is humility. I met an old man when I went to Thunder Bay in 1969, all he showed me was his kindness. He was very jolly, happy, sharing everything. Fourteen years later, when they told me to go to a medicine man, they said, "Bring some tobacco to Noel." That was the first time in fourteen years that I knew he was a medicine man. Not once in those fourteen years did he say he was a medicine man: that's humility. Never talked about anything unless he was given this [tobacco], it's very crucial. There's a concept too, it's very difficult to put down in writing or to describe into English the philosophy of life of our people. It's very difficult to do that. The closest I can come is a concept that in our language is called [Ojibwa expression]. I asked the old man, "What the heck does that mean?" and in Cree they have a similar expression.

He said, "To live a good life."

And I asked him, "What the heck is a good life?"

And he said, "Be kind to yourself, look after yourself. Feed yourself, look after your health as much as you can."

But underlying that there are a lot of spiritual laws which are there and one of the most important ones is physical death — spiritual law we cannot overcome. It's always there so now through the teachings we are given the philosophy of life to try to live a good life because this is what we were put on earth for, by the Creator...

So when we talk about life I think that one of the most important concepts to realize is that we, as Native people, have a spiritual side. That spiritual side, we as human beings must try to find a balance that suits us, our families and our communities. That's the key. However we do that is up to us because we were also given free will by the Creator.... That's why we smudged this morning. That's why I smudge every morning. Because I don't want my free will to disrespect anyone or any person who says or does something throughout this day. That's what I want to do. That's a teaching from our people: to always be honest, try to share, try to be kind and most of important, to have faith.... That's the way I understand: these ceremonies, rituals and language are there to give us values. What they talk about

is honesty, sharing, faith, humility, respect, kindness, love. Then we blend that within our own selves: mind, body, spirit. And then we use those values to help us cope with or overcome any problems that we face.

Though this man spoke of his Ojibwa traditions, other members of the circle could identify with these values and sometimes referred to them in the process of the two days. People also talked about some specific practices that they felt were central to their identity, such as going to celebrations such as pow wows and cultural festivals; taking part in rituals and celebrations like naming ceremonies, smudges, sweatlodges or wakes; singing; drumming; dancing; doing arts and crafts; hunting and fishing; living off the land; learning about traditional ways of life; speaking one's Aboriginal language; wearing clothing and jewellery that reflect Aboriginal designs or messages.

Another important aspect of identity for the people in this circle and for most other Aboriginal people (almost universally) in other learning circles was the connection to the land. Here is a sample of what people said about the land:

Shared sense of affinity towards the land.... Since coming to the city I've always had this feeling in the spring and the fall...this fever. [laughs] I always want to go back, since I was a kid we went out to the land and did our spring tapping and gathering and whatnot. And in the fall we did the same thing. So I seem to get that...even my son he wasn't exposed to that up until about seven years old but he has the same urges every spring and every fall.

Another woman said this:

Last Sunday we went way up north and it was so beautiful just sitting out there in the open. Just making a fire outside and my daughter in law cooking on the open fire. And just enjoying listening to the birds. Just being out there, there was a sense of a something that come over you. The feeling that Mother Earth is right there. Just everything that was there, and you seem to relate to everything that was around you — the trees, the rocks, the water and all that. Everyone had a good feeling just being there. And Mother Earth was so warm, the grass coming up and you see everything so beautiful and you think that the Creator put it there for us! You know, to use for ourselves, a good feeling. Whereas in the city you don't have that. You don't have that at all. The kids want to go run out but you have to keep them inside. They can't even run around. Over there they run around and they can enjoy themselves.

Not only was their relationship to the land/nature central to the identity of individuals, it

was also an important value that bonded Aboriginal people from many different nations together.

Another one of the early themes that emerged in the discussion of core aspects of cultural identity in the present was healing. The people in the circle shared many experiences from their lives and the pain and confusion they are striving to overcome. Residential school, adoption and other assimilation policies underlie the abuses and addictions that disrupted the lives of all participants who spoke on these issues. During the conversation the point was made that speaking about one's healing path promotes healing for all and helps to identify one's identity. The healing path for many was a state of transition from confusion and self-destruction to a healthy Aboriginal identity based on pride, self-esteem and an understanding of the historical roots of colonization that underlie their circumstances. Here is a passage from the youngest member of the circle:

I'm a really confused young person.... I was confused for a long time, I didn't even know my own strength. Other people saw things in my and I didn't even know it. 'Cause I was confused! I had a lot of anger and a lot of unresolved issues in my life. My own personal life. Like dealing with my own sexual abuse, what happened to me as a kid, and dealing with my own violence at home. And being on the street and feeling racism. And just feeling like I couldn't go nowhere cause I was ashamed of being Indian. I was confused like that for a lot of years. I didn't even know who I was! It's strange that I can say that today. I've got strengths. I know who I am and I know who I'm becoming and where I came from. And I always keep that in mind and I give thanks to the creator that I'm here today.

[later]...I don't like it at all. I don't. But I believe we can't go back to wearing breech clothes, living in teepees and hunting the buffalo. Because it's unreal. I do believe that we have to take the morals and values and traditions of our culture and use them. 'Cause then we know who we are. It really hurts me to see white Indians. It does. I experience that a lot. I wanted to be white all my life. All my life I wanted to be white! Eh, because they have money, they have nice cars. I thought that was the way they live. Until... every time I tried to be white I'd fall short. Then I would become really frustrated and angry. Until I learned how to just be myself and be proud of who I am. I used to be ashamed of my people cause I thought they all ran drugs or ran whores on the street — pardon my language but that's real! Like that's what I thought: we're all on welfare, we're all in the jail systems — we're oppressed! We all live on reserves, it's pretty sad living on the res. You know I couldn't understand it. I was ashamed of that for a long time. Until I learned to take my white brother's education system, and take all that negative stuff from the past and turn it into positive. To me my healing journey is where I came from, where I am now, and who I am becoming. Because, to me, my journey is never going to end. It's never going to end! It's going to keep on going until I'm dead.

This young man was, at times, visibly angry about the forces that have so negatively affected his life and Aboriginal people in general. He also sometimes expressed frustration at the adults in the circle when he perceived that they were not as passionate about the issues as he was — in many respects he represented a voice of youth that is disappointed with some of the adult leaders who are, in part, determining the fate of the next generation.

Here is an excerpt from another woman who talked of her own pain and her healing path:

I think who I am is defined by the needs that I have. As a child I grew up for the first six years on the reserve. There was a lot of abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, you name it. My mom and dad were very unhealthy. I was taken away from them and put into a residential school. From there I went into a foster home that was very abusive — emotional abuse, and there was some physical abuse.

So I grew up very ashamed of who I was. And it's only in the last four years that I started becoming proud of who I am as an Indian person. I didn't consider myself...I knew I was Indian but I didn't want to admit it. And I didn't talk to anybody about it. I married a man who was very abusive. You go from one abusive relationship into another because you have low self-esteem, you don't think anything of yourself. So I pick people that would abuse me because I was used to that. And when you've adjusted to some type of treatment you continue to put yourself in the same situation because it's the only comfortable thing that you feel.

So I grew up with that and when I went to my foster home, it was a German family and he wasn't very...I mean he was there and he was loving but he didn't know all that abuse was going on in the home. It was the mother that was being abusive. And so I felt I grew up alone and I still hurt today from that. Not having parents — first of all feeling rejection — not having parents as you grow up — like I didn't consider my foster family as parents. They just weren't there. They gave me my physical needs, my basics — food, shelter and warmth. But there was no emotional love of any kind. So I grew up very unhealthy and I felt that I didn't belong anywhere. And I didn't have parents. Social Services put in the contract...that there was not to be any contact with me from my relatives.

As a little girl I didn't understand why nobody came to visit me. It was like being totally rejected by the whole family and not knowing why. So growing up with no parents and no father, one of the greatest needs I have is to belong and to know that you have a father. So in the last, about four years ago I became a Christian and now I consider our Creator as my father. Now I do have a father. That's a need that I did have and I'm fulfilling that. And God is helping me with that area. Another need that I have is to be accepted as a Native person. Like I said I was ashamed of who I was and I didn't teach my children to be proud of who they were. My husband was verbally abusive, sexually, physically — the whole thing over again. It was only about three years ago that I taught my kids to be proud of who they were. And one is 17, one is 19 and one is 15. The 15 year old is about the most healthy one; the 19 year old doesn't even recognize or say

that he is Native. So I've lost something there but I'm working on it. And it's very painful to see that my kid is ashamed of his culture. [quivering voice]

Growing up in the foster home, the first thing I lost is my language. I wasn't allowed to speak my language. So I lost that instantly. I lost...I can't lose a culture but my culture was put aside from me. And it's just in the last three years, more so in the last year, that I started finding out that I do have a culture, that I do belong somewhere. When I was in my foster home, I remember the kids at school, the Native kids from the reserve, put me down. They didn't want to be around me because I was part white or in a white home. The white children didn't want to talk to me because I was Native. So I was stuck in the middle. So I think it's very important that we recognize our children and know where our children are going. Because when they are uprooted from their culture and from their family environment it really ruins them [voice quivering] and makes them...moulds them sometimes to be angry. I had hard time to forgive and to be where I am today. But it's I guess being maybe a tough Native. [laughs] The toughness in me, I say, is my Native part. That I was able to survive what I did survive.

And it's taking the negative things that happened to me and harnessing them into good strong powerful power. Not letting it keep you down. I was down on my knees and laying down on the ground and being kicked around and pushed around. And I got up off my knees and decided that was it! I'm not laying down anymore. It's time to rise up above all that pain and be strong and to continue on with life and hopefully to help other Native people say, "Don't let anybody push you or oppress you. You have the power within you! God can give you that power to rise up and stand up and be healthy.... The abuses that you experience, don't let them hold you down. Use them to make you strong, to bring out your power."

As one can read in both passages — the young man and the woman — harnessing pain and suffering and transforming them into some form of personal power was a turning point for more than one person in the Saskatoon circle. One of the elders in the group also spoke about pain as a inevitable part of life:

There's a lot of pain that I feel for my brothers and sisters here. It's not unusual, it's not unusual at all. I remember my grandfather, grandmother, also had pain. They never went to residential school. So it's nothing unusual to have pain. I experience personal pain in life. Later on I found it to be one of the philosophies of our people, and I talk from the Anishnabe philosophy — the Ojibwa — that that's part of life! Pain is part of life.

Though pain may be inevitable, many of the group members still felt a lot of anger because much of the pain or oppression they felt in their lives was imposed by the dominant white society. Pain was also a force that people felt created cohesion for all Aboriginal people (see next section). One man summed up the issue this way for the group: "Shared sense of identity, shared sense of suppression, shared sense of poverty...shall I go on?" The participants laughed at this comment because, for them, pain is inevitable for Aboriginal persons who

acknowledge and express their identity. The pain that exists in their lives is multifaceted and is, in large part, the symptomatic expression of long-term racist victimization at both a personal and a public level. This pain is an indicator of the forces that diminish or weaken identity and it is with these forces that all urban Aboriginal people must do battle in order to ensure that their identity and self-respect flourish against all odds.

The Past: Significant Events, Experiences, People, Places

The treaties were done according to the will of the Creator. And the Creator's vision, through the elders, is how the treaties should always be taken. Just recently, I just came back from Ontario, and they've been fighting for their treaty rights for years, ever since I can remember. One of them involved fishing rights. And there's one band in our area that, despite all the confiscation of fish, all the jail terms, fines, they still fish because they are exercising their treaty rights. And treaty rights are God's rights. God told them, "You can fish for your family, you can give the fish away, you can even sell it if you want to." Of course you have to remember in those days there was no money but they could exchange it... And the Creator told them that: "That's my fish. You can use it." And the old people told the young people, "You can do that all the time." And they've been doing that for years. Just in the last few days, one of the Ontario courts has finally agreed with the Native people. And some of our old people are dead now, they are not here to appreciate that.

For this group of Saskatchewan treaty people, the treaties are undoubtedly one of the most important events from the past. The quotation just cited is from one of the elders who spoke on the intent of the treaties and their meaning in the lives of Aboriginal people whose forebears signed them. Another elder was asked to speak about the signing of the treaties to help the Royal Commission and some of the people in the circle understand them better. Here is a small passage from her teaching that focuses on the sacred nature of the treaties; specifically she talked about the signing of Treaty 4, which her grandfather and her husband's grandfather took part in.

When the elders there spoke to the Queen's representative they said, "We are not going to give you our land, we're not selling it. But we will share it. Because we're going to teach you to live off the land for agricultural purposes."

"All right but this is all the land I want from you [topsoil the depth of a shovel blade]."

So that's when they came to an agreement. But some of the leaders who signed the treaty, now they had to get direction, now they had to go before their highest leader. They went out to fast, they wanted direction from the Creator. That's who directed them in what they were going to sign. Not anybody from this land but the spiritual powers. That's when they went and fasted and they got their answers, each and every one of them, because they wanted to get direction from

the Creator...

The Creator told them, "You will not sell the land. You will sign treaty with the Queen's representative. But you will not give up what's out here: the trees, the waters and anything below. You will not give up those. But you know, the white man has a crooked plan because you cannot read or write. But you have to be smarter than he is. Ask him how truthful is he to make sure he is not telling lies." So that's what happened.

So when they were all ready to sign...and everybody was there...and they were being watched by the army...so one of them said: "I do not give you anything below. Even as I stand here there is something underneath that I feel, there's something down here. That I will not give you."

...So they did not give anything below. And then he said: "I don't give you my trees and my forests."

And they said, "No I don't want your forest. I don't want your resources."

"I do not give my hunting rights. The food that I eat, that is mine."

"I don't want that. But we will protect for you the animals because there will be lots of white people coming to settle on the land. Therefore we will make preserves to keep the animals for you."

...they didn't give up the hunting rights...nor the waters...just enough [soil on the surface] for agriculture.... And they signed that treaty and that's why the treaty is sacred today. They are sacred because they were signed in the name of the Creator...that was their teacher, that was why they went into the mountains to suffer and get direction.

The truth of this negotiation process has been a source of bitterness and anger for the descendants of the Aboriginal people who signed the treaties. As one man in the group stated: "They have never lived up to their fiduciary responsibility, since day one." People in the learning circle expressed much frustration about the fact that the government is not living up to their treaty obligations and so the treaty rights are significantly diminished. For example, hunting and fishing rights are guaranteed only on treaty land, but because the members of this group live away from their traditional lands they feel they do not have access to the rights due to them. One of the main underlying barriers was the lack of transportability of their rights.

When our ancestors signed treaties there were no boundaries of where those treaties were going to go or where you could carry those treaties.

The *Indian Act* was another barrier:

When you look at the BNA Act it states that the Crown has an obligation to Indians *and* Indian lands. It doesn't say "to Indians *on* Indian lands." It's the *Indian Act* that came in and took away from the content of the BNA Act and made it to Indians *on* Indian lands. So now, as an urban Indian, I pay E&H [education and health] tax on my phone, and a whole bunch of things when I shouldn't be paying any of these taxes.

From the words of different speakers it became clear that many people in this group felt

the *Indian Act* was a major piece of legislation that derailed the treaty agreements. Again, one of the elders, a woman who always spoke with anger and passion from her lived experience, shared with the group more of the history told to her by her elders. In her words, the *Indian Act* was "the beginning of the crookedness" and it effectively divided once peaceful Aboriginal nations.

When they signed those treaties...they said, "We will put, on your reserves, a school when you are ready. We will give you teachers, when you are ready." Then they told them that they wanted their children to be educated...at the highest level.

"Granted!"

Health?

"We will look after your health too — the medicines and everything."

...And to teach them how to survive on farming.

"We will give you the equipment and teach you how to farm.... a team of oxen and everything you need." Anybody who wants to be a farmer today they can't get nothing from the government...

They told them: "You will never go to war because we will protect you...you won't have to take up arms." Because the queen said, "You are my children. I will look after you."

..."You will never starve again because I will be there to give you food because you are my children." So now what's happening, they used to give rations to our people...because that's when they had nothing.

Right after the treaties were signed the government put up another policy, the *Indian Act*. That was the beginning of the crookedness...they used the *Indian Act* to divide the nations. Before we were close, we didn't care who came in our home because that was our people, we loved everybody. Today if you go on the reserve...people of all races are accepted.... We don't discriminate them. Who discriminates them? The *Indian Act*! Because that was the law of the white man. That was written without even an Indian being involved.

That's why there's so much of this turmoil going on because the government is trying to cheat that treaty. Look at the resources they took away alone! Every time I see a trailer or a truck with lumber — we never gave that up they just took it away!...stealing it in front of us. We never gave that up. When did we make a treaty on the resources? When did we make a treaty on the minerals they take away? — the gold and the gas and everything they take away from the ground. We never made treaties on that, they just took it away. The government owes us lots and they have the gall to say that we are a tax burden to them. That's our land! Are they going to tax us for our land! They should be thankful that they are here.

Given this perspective on the history of the treaty process and the implications for the current relationship with non-Aboriginal governments, the anger and mistrust expressed throughout the two days were understandable. Given the feelings expressed in this learning circle about the treaties, this last excerpt is a fitting summary of the discussion:

The treaties are sacred agreements and it's the white people who don't understand that. How do we have to make them understand that? How many Okas does it take to make them understand that? We can only be pushed so far. And the animal world tells us that too. One time my son was setting snares and he came across a little mouse. Boy, that mouse took after my son...it was going to fight for its life. And that just reminded me of our people — you push us so far and then we'll have to fight. But that's the last straw. But we have the right to do that. There are also cultural differences, it's all one-sided, it's a dominant point of view. All the time.

Another significant experience from the past that has had an impact on the Aboriginal identity of the people in this learning circle was their lives as youths living in their Aboriginal communities. People looked back fondly to the time when cultural traditions, practices and relationships that supported and were the basis of their identity were pervasive in their lives.

For me the most important thing in my life, historically, is having lived on the reserve for the first six years of my life and not knowing any outside world. I was a very happy child. I never experienced anything like racism or even a lot of the other stuff like that. Like [another speaker in the circle] I was also very sheltered and it was the happiest time of my life.

Another woman spoke of traditional family structure, looking back to a time when Aboriginal people felt the security of extended families. And she mourned the decline of this fundamental facet of Aboriginal identity:

I could talk about people and how important we are as a people in our relationships. She [another circle member] talked about extended families...what it means and the respect of one another as people. Especially where relationship was not by name as we do today; it was by actual relationship — my aunt, my uncle. In our own language, calling my dad's brothers was like calling my own father, that's how I addressed them. And my mother's sisters were like my second mothers. That's like the belonging was there so close that we could walk into any of my mother's sisters [homes] like they were second mothers to us. It was that, it was respect and you felt secure. You had that extended family that if our mother is gone, well we had another mother here and there's another one up here. And they took us that way, they even called us their daughter and us too — [says Saulteak expression for aunt, sounds like the word for mother] — that's like my second mother.

Same thing with uncles, on my dad's side his brothers were like my fathers. And that's how they addressed us: "My daughter. My daughter." It was not by name. Now, today that's lost. Relationship is lost. That's why a lot of young people are lost — they don't know who they are related to. And that was, when you talk about prophecies, our people said that: "Some day, you will be so mixed up in the white world, mixed up with alcohol, mixed up with everything, that you are not going to know who you are related to. That's going to be lost."

Even, as you hold your own child in your arms, some day that child will not even understand you as a mother. It won't have your tongue [language]. You'll lose to somebody else. Lose to somebody else! And yet that's your child! That's

loss of identity or loss of a language.

I say that the relationship of people was so close long ago, everyone knew in each home who that was — your uncle, your aunt, your grandfather — everybody was grandfather, grandmother. That's the way we addressed each other, not by name. Now today that's lost!

What really amazed me, a couple of years ago there was a wedding back home — one of my brothers' daughters got married. So we went there, all the sisters — we're a big family — all my sisters and brothers were there. My sister's son was sitting there, feeling a little half cut. Everyone was having a good time. I went around shaking hands and hugging some of my nephews. "Auntie, auntie."

And this one guy, my nephew, my sister's oldest boy [gently banging hand on table for emphasis] I said, "Hello my son."

"Oh! I didn't even know I was related to you."

I said, "What the hell is wrong with you. Your mother is my own sister. You're my nephew like a son to me!"

"I didn't know that."

You know that was a shock to me, he didn't even know he was like a son to me. My sister, full sister, same father, same mother, her own child didn't even know that I was his aunt. But he's a loner. He's somebody who doesn't really bother anybody. But I really gave it to him that time.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Auntie, I didn't even know I was related to you."

I said, "You have children and you don't even know who your relations are?"

See that's the lost of a relationship. Whereas before it was so close. [shakes head, resigned] We're losing it.

The loss of the foundation of traditional extended family is fundamental to the cultural identity of all Aboriginal people. It is a profound blow to the language, traditions, stories, ceremonies, rituals — the lifeblood of any culture — when the family is in decline.

Some of the other experiences from the past that have had an impact on the Aboriginal identity of the people in this learning circle included Bill C-31; adoption; removal of children by social services; pow wows; education experiences that are both positive and negative; recovery from alcoholism; developing positive organizations on-reserve; all-Aboriginal sports organizations or tournaments; experiences of token involvement in policy development and service delivery for Aboriginal people in the urban environment; and the historical migration of Aboriginal people across the Canada/U.S. border fleeing persecution and war.

Barriers: Cultural Identity Denied or Diminished

Over and over again people in this learning circle said that they struggled to express their Aboriginal identity within the urban environment. This woman identified how she felt angry and

trapped in her efforts:

I know who I am. I know what my culture is. But right now I am an angry prisoner. I am angry because I am trapped in a white man's world which is made of concrete and blacktop and white man rules. My culture is to be able to go out and hunt on the land that I grew up on. But I can't do that anywhere here! [laughs] You're not going to find a deer running around in the middle of the city. Another part of my culture is being able to make a smokehouse in my backyard and smoking the meat and enjoying it. And if I did that here in the city I'm pretty sure a fire truck would come along and blow away the whole thing. Another thing...I belong to a drum group and I'm pretty sure if I phoned up the drum group and said, "Come on down we'll build a bonfire in my backyard and we'll practise our pow wow songs." The cops would be knocking on my front door saying I'm disturbing the peace. And I would say [if an elder appeared in a dream to me], "Elder help me to find a way to preserve my culture — because I know what my culture is — and to teach it to my children. Help me to find a way within this society because I have to live in this society now.

Like this woman there were others in the group who did not feel confused about their Aboriginal identity but rather felt stifled or frustrated in their attempts to practise it in the urban environment, which is also a core part of their identity that they have to negotiate with.

Very much related to the powerlessness that some people felt around expressing their identity in the urban centre was their feeling that their own Aboriginal political organizations and leadership didn't advocate for their needs effectively.

It seems like the minute you become an urban Indian you're on your own. What good is a First Nations organization if they can't represent you. What good are they? And these guys are supposed to be our representatives. Who rightfully represents us on any given issue?

The criticisms of the Aboriginal leadership seemed to centre on the issue of representation and legitimacy. One man stated that, "They're not in it for our people, they are in it for their own personal gain." Other speakers in the circle focused on accountability, like this woman:

They're not accountable to the people. I can't go to my leaders, the AFN leaders certainly not, I can't even go to my own band and say, "This is a concern I have." They're just not open — national, provincial, territorial, local, urban. That's just my band. Maybe other bands have a better relationship with the people. We can't even vote — I don't think anyone in this room can vote for our national leaders, but they say they represent our concerns.

Some group members felt very angry about this issue and described specific instances of abuse of power such as leaders who abuse alcohol or funds. Another complaint was that those in power practise nepotism instead of using a democratic or traditional process to fill key political

and administrative positions. This man took a broader cultural and historical approach to his criticisms:

I find we are too westernized. We're trying to compete in a set of rules that are not made by us, nor are they part of us, nor do we understand them. Speaking from personal experience, being involved in the community, I find as a Native person trying to represent a community, I found it hard! Trying to deal with western beliefs and thoughts, at the same time trying to incorporate the needs and aspirations of the Native community. I guess what I'm trying to say is we're lost! ...We're a lost people, especially when it comes to leadership. We're trying to — leaders — practise the principles and ways of the white man which are totally foreign to [us].

Another speaker focused on traditional cultural practices that were used to ensure effective leadership was nurtured and guaranteed in the past. For this speaker the underlying theme of these traditional practices is one of self-sacrifice and the endurance of pain for one's community well-being — principles that could be applied to the modern political arena as well.

They've forgotten everything about their culture, their language. What sacrifice means in our traditional way. And this is something I've learned only recently speaking with some of the elders. And I think some of our leaders, when they think about sacrifice, they think about leaving their families or stuff like that, not having any friends because they are political leaders. When we talk about sacrifice in our traditional way that I have been taught, sacrifice is going out in the bush for two days or two nights or four days without food and sacrificing for your people. Or going out sundancing, or going to sweats. 'Cause nobody in their right mind will say that, "I like sundancing" or "I like to go out fasting." It's just something you have to do for your people, for your next generation. I think that's something that's missing from our leadership right now. That's what I understand.... I'm still learning a lot about it. But if I see a leader, they've got scars on their chest from the sundance, that's when I know they are a real leader. 'Cause they've sacrificed themselves four days and four nights for their people, for their family, for future generations. And that's my understanding of what leadership is and the loss of identity.... I don't want to really put these people down, I understand a lot of them have lost all that stuff and don't know anything about it.

Within the context of this discussion many people, like this man, could identify how the colonization process played a role in derailing traditional Aboriginal political practices, attempting to replace them with European democratic process. The result today, in the perception of members of this circle, is a political system that is confused and unable to represent the needs of its membership effectively. Additionally, one must not forget that Aboriginal political organizations were invited to take part in Canadian politics only relatively recently, so it is inevitable that this important historical change will take time to be effective.

Racism was another issue that group members felt diminished their cultural identity in

the urban centre. In this passage the pervasive and crushing effect that racism has on people's lives was exposed:

I think the most terrible experience for an Indian person in the urban setting is racism in the community. That diminishes your self-esteem, confidence and anything else. You experience racism every day in the stores and everywhere else, on the street. All the other groups discriminate against you.

This woman went on to identify these places as specific examples of where Aboriginal people experience racism: schools, educational institutions, jails, the justice system, police, workplaces, health and social services. Here is a specific example of racism in the education system shared by one of the young women in the group:

For me it was when I was growing up in a small town. When I was in school we had a cultural feast where you're supposed to bring something from your cultural background. I asked my [adopted] mom and she said, "I don't know what you have." She said, "The only thing I can think of is I'll make you a Saskatoon berry pie. Didn't your people eat Saskatoon berries?"

"I guess, that's what we learned at school."

So she made me a pie and the teacher wouldn't serve it. She said, "Your family is English. They're English and Scottish background. Why didn't you bring something like that. We don't serve that food here."

And she wouldn't eat it. She wouldn't let me serve it. I felt really bad — mostly for her — because I wanted to beat her badly. [laughs] But I was too small and I didn't. I was really quite young, I was only in grade three, but I still remember that to this day. And it also strengthened my cultural awareness because my mom supported me, and my dad, they both went to the school and confronted the teacher and the staff. But it didn't help.

The theme of the mainstream education system as a barrier to the expression and development of Aboriginal identity is something that all the learning circles focused on a great deal. This group was no exception. One of the elders had worked as a teacher in the mainstream education system for many years. He, like others, was critical of the education system and the effects it has had on Aboriginal people:

Things don't come to us from books either. That's what I get angry about with the formal education system, that's what it does, it further alienates you from who you are. That's what the formal education system does. But we've always been saying, the old people have always been saying, get some elders in there, get some ceremonies, language — they're just starting to do that.

Another young person told this story of how standard high school curriculum materials have the potential negatively to effect the identity of young Aboriginal students. Fortunately, this woman was able to turn the potentially negative into a sense of determination for herself. Still, her story illustrates the impact that curriculum and historical accounts from a white perspective

can have on young Aboriginal people:

What really made an impact in my life is grade nine social studies. I remember I was sitting in class one time in grade nine. And the text books were given — this bugged me for the rest of my life and I swore one day I was going to find out the truth — I read in this grade nine social studies book that Big Bear and his people massacred the people in Fort Pitt while they were sleeping. Then General Steel defeated Big Bear at Steel Narrows. And for the longest time it really really bothered me, because why did they label Big Bear and his tribe massacre — the choice of the words, eh? And then when General Steel and his army "defeated" Big Bear at Steel Narrows they built up a big monument. Steel Narrows is a historic site, and where's Big Bear in all of this? As I grew up I asked questions and the people at the Little Lake band say that the same events occurred, Big Bear and his people were attacked while they were asleep. And yet Steel and his men did not "massacre" Big Bear and his tribe, they "defeated" him — while he was asleep. And that made me to be...the way I think, the way I speak and everything else. Because I always determined that one day I would find out the true story behind it.

And it made me to see that I was a Native person in a white school, learning a white school system. And what that said to me was: Native people are savages, white people are noble. And the prejudice and racism that is taught in our education system to our children. And to this day I have never found out if that social studies book is outdated or anything — I never did go back to find out. But that made a big impact in my life to help me deal with racism and prejudice and be proud of who I am.

Who writes history and whose reality does it validate? This story is a good illustration how the identity of Aboriginal students is diminished or denied, at very least, through the omission of their experience. For the most part people in the circles relayed stories that described experiences of racism that were much more blatant but equally destructive.

The residential school system is an example of an all-out attack on Aboriginal cultural identity. The participants in this circle who had been in the schools gave many examples of how their identity was squashed, sometimes violently, in these institutions. One of the elders gave an extended account of her experience trying to stay out of the school until the authorities threatened to throw her father in jail if she didn't go. Here is an excerpt from her description of her experience when she finally gave in and went to the school:

It was a whole terror for me from the start. That was the beginning of a nightmare! Everything is half and half. The good part is: the food, we had enough to eat, we had beds our own beds and that was nice, that was the good part. Of course I had that at home too. But mentally [points to head while shaking in disbelief] mentally was the biggest part...that was the beginning of learning that my being an Indian was ugly! Being taught that being an Indian, that I belonged to the devil! That my language belonged to the devil! And the things that I learned

at home: respect, and pride, sharing, was all taken away from me from those so called men of God and the women of God! They had big crucifixes, the nuns, and everything and I used to look up and I used to wonder if they were angels from heaven. But what kind of angels could they be the way they would beat us up like that? And yet that's the way it was.

So now, as time went on and on every day I was being told who I wasn't. This is where I learned to hate. How to be ashamed. How not to respect. All that anger was in me now. I began to be ashamed of being an Indian. I began to be ashamed of my language. I began to hate my people, because they were Indian, because they were the cause of me being here. But now I wanted to be white! I wanted to be exactly what the white man's religion and his face and everything. Because they brought big pictures into our school: this was hell, this was purgatory, there was heaven. That's the things we were taught.

Here [in one of the pictures] was where all the Indian people belong with their sundances, with their sweatlodges. You see them right in the picture, with a bunch of serpents and devils with horns [and forks] and little kids going to hell with their parents. That picture is somewhere still today. 'Cause one guy had it as a small picture, he said they have it pinned up in their community way up north.

Now, this was purgatory, some people were going into there. Those that were ready to change and go to heaven, want to be like the white man — to throw away their culture, their land, to give up their culture but to be white-oriented. Now they can burn in here for some time, their sins are going to be burnt off and they're going to come clean. Then they're going to go to heaven.

Oh, well on that road there was a cloud. There was four angels with trumpets, one on each corner and there was a road and a cloud. And on that road there was white people, there was nuns and there were priests — all of them with a big crucifix — going to heaven. I wanted to go there! I didn't want to go here [hell, purgatory]! So I had no use for my culture. I had no use for my language. I had no use for my mother and dad — I hated them! I was ashamed of them! I learned this in an institution of the Roman Catholic school! I learned that that was what they taught us.

And a lot of us today wonder why people have no self-esteem, no value, no pride? They taught us that! And who made it like that for us to lose our culture, our language, our identity? That was the system of the government. "Let's build them schools. Take their children away and put them in buildings. Take their language and their culture away so some day they will not know who they are. They will be just a people among many." That's where we're at today. That was the system.

This passage illustrates many sides of the residential school experience but most of all it gives us an intimate look at the pervasive impact the school had on the Aboriginal identity of the students who were forced to attend. Further, the close relationship between the church and the government as well as the use of religion for the purpose of cultural genocide are evident in this excerpt. Another young man added his perspective:

I would go so far as to call it ritual abuse. 'Cause they sent the fear of God in

them. Called them pagans. Told them they'd be going to hell and those children had no defence against those nuns and priests. They robbed them of their identity, made them cut off their braids. Robbed them of their language, their spirituality, their self-esteem, they sexually abused them. And the people who were in the residential schools, their children then went into the child welfare system also. All mainstream institutions, no matter how good their intentions, are all based on the foundations of structured racism.

The government-funded social service agencies were another significant diminishing force in the lives of people in this group. Many of the participants had been negatively affected by the social services industry. One woman in the group had been adopted away from her biological family at a very young age and had this to say about her experience:

Family services, social services, the adoption — they deprived me of my family, my language, my culture, my cultural identity for quite some time, any knowledge. They changed me completely from what I could have been. Another woman had similar feelings based on the experience of her sister:

For me it's agencies. Because of what happened to my sister — she lost her children and they went up for adoption. And fifteen and a half years later we found them and brought them back home to Canada. And they are very disturbed. They have lost their relationship with one another. They're lost! And because of the way the agencies set their system, they don't involve Native people to make policies and they impose their values on us. So as a result people are still paying for their sad mistakes. And if that doesn't change it's going to get worse. Here is another passage on a similar issue:

There's still lots of Native children going to white foster homes. And as long as that's happening they're losing their identity because there are just as good homes on the reserve where they could be sent to.... everything, their roots, their family. See the family is the foundation of who we are and if we don't have a family we're nobody. We don't have a sense of belonging. But when we have that foundation our grandparents, great-grandparents, brothers and sisters, extended family, we're a total human being.

Others focused on the loss of rights through adoption:

These children, when they are adopted, get their rights taken away from them and it is very difficult to get them back once they become adults. First of all, when they are adopted their rights are taken away...and then it's difficult to get them back.

It's an inherent right that is taken away. Even when the child is old enough they won't get that information unless they go searching in the streets for who their people are. They seem to find their people anyway, but the hard way.

Once they're adopted out it denies them the inherent right to become a member of their First Nation society.

The denial of inherent Aboriginal rights, the denial of a relationship with one's family and

community and the diminishment of Aboriginal identity were some of the negative impacts that people experienced in this system. Members of the group also identified barriers in terms of access to information about one's own life and the complexity of this massive bureaucracy:

One of my fellow students, his parents were being told by the child adoption agency that their son had gone over to Germany to serve in the army and he'd been in Saskatoon all this time. But they all lied that he was overseas in the service.... The social agency delivered a lie to his parents — why? When he went back he couldn't get information about himself! Like where he was from, what band he was. But we started with a last name and went with it... After a month we were lucky, we found his parents. But the idea of such a bureaucracy; one would think a government who purports to know what they are doing would have their shit together. Trying to accept them lying to people I guess questions their sincerity. And in my mind: what are they doing to other people? How many other Native children are out there trying to find their way home and are facing the same block?

The system is so complex and so bureaucratic that it's difficult for them to prove that they have treaty status. And sometimes they won't have access to their own files. That's a system in itself...it's so difficult to access that information. Like the education institution the social service industry has been a major barrier to the development and expression of Aboriginal identity.

The media were another major societal institution that has diminished the cultural identity of the participants in the Saskatoon learning circle. Of the stories shared in the group one of the most shocking was a popular local radio phone-in show called "Boots and Salutes", where callers can identify a person or group they wish to salute or boot:

And CJWW, their "Boots and Salutes". And they make me so mad because they have so many white people and they're always booting Indians for whatever reason. They never understand the circumstances of Native people and they have the nerve to get on "Boots and Salutes"... [Facilitator: What is that?] It's a morning radio phone-in show where people get to phone in and boot somebody or salute somebody. [Facilitator: And people phone in and boot Indians?] Oh yeah! All the time! It's a big thing for Indians to be booted on there. [group becomes animated with many stories between participants]

This radio station that supports the public degrading and shaming of Aboriginal people was one of the most blatant examples of racism in Saskatoon. The participants in the circle also cited examples from local newspapers and television stations that offer a selective view of Aboriginal people — most often a negative one. For example, this man gave a brief example of how skid row is portrayed whenever there is a story about this part of the city:

And you take that a little further, when they video tape skid row or the streets, when they do this program on street life, well, who's the street life? Native people.

And prostitution? Well there's only Native people there that are being shown as prostitutes. What about all the white people that are there? White people get drunk in the bar and walk down the streets.

Here is another passage that describes the selectively negative reporting of the Aboriginal community that the people in this learning circle described:

But yeah, you notice the discrimination in the media. On John A. Macdonald a couple of months ago when that guy shot his wife and then he committed suicide, it didn't hit big, blown-up front page with names and everything else. And we were working a Bingo that night, there was these white people talking about it and everything, and this woman said, "I wonder if they are white or Native." Like the first thought she had was: are they white or Native.

And I said to her, "I guarantee you those people are not Native."

And she goes, "How do you know?"

And I said, "If they were Native their names would be on there, it would say 'Native Murder Suicide' right on the front page and it would be in big letters." I said, "I guarantee you they are not Native." And they weren't. So to me it diminishes me because I identify with that group. You can't look at me and tell me I don't look like I'm from an Aboriginal group. I don't have treaty Indian or Métis or anything on my head but if you look at me you can tell that I am of an Aboriginal or First Nations group.

Like their comments on the education system, the people in this group said that the media also demonstrate racism through omission. Here are two brief examples of this phenomenon:

I guess you can reverse that too. If there's an Indian event in town or if there is an Indian person who does something really terrific, it's never on the front page, it would be stuck somewhere in the back pages.

It's like this in the media: I got ganged up on by a whole bunch of white guys one time. Did it make the news? No. But as soon as we go and gang up on a white person BOOM! It's in the media and it's all over. They exploit us too much.

Who writes the news? What is their perspective? How were they socialized? Whose experience of reality does their work validate? These are all key questions when inquiring about why these omissions take place and what beliefs they support about Aboriginal people. More important for the people in this group, how does the news that is written empower or diminish the identity of Aboriginal people?

Empowerment: Cultural Identity Enhanced or Strengthened

In the following passage one of the elders in the treaty circle shares with us many of the things in his life that support and enhance his Ojibwa identity. It is clear that he has undergone major changes in his life to follow the path of his cultural identity, beginning with quitting his career as

a school teacher — a suggestion from the elder he refers to as "the old man". Throughout this account, the man focuses on themes that are significant to him — spirituality, the guidance and teachings of the elders and faith in the Creator — and are fundamental to the enhancement and growth of his Aboriginal identity.

I feel very comfortable in the faith that the elders have given me that once you develop a faith in the Creator then he will look after you. It's very simple but it's hard to do. You've got to give up many things. But I've been looked after. It's kind of hard to understand, especially in this modern world where economic wealth is so important. That's what I used to be one time, you know: making fifty or sixty thousand bucks a year, nine to five. No, I was uncomfortable in that so the old man said, "Quit your job." And he sent me on a fast.

So I asked him, "How many days?"

"Four days, four nights without food or water."

I told him, "You're crazy!"

He says, "I'm not crazy. You're the one who's crazy."

I couldn't even stay away from food for four hours, let alone four days. But this is when the old man was trying to teach me something about faith in the Creator. Our elders have always had that, our people have always had that faith.

...the libraries are full of the history of oppression of our people and yet the elders are still with us regardless of all that oppression — they're still here. And I guess they'll always be here.... I don't know if it was any easier before the white man came — I wouldn't think so.

I remember as a child going with my mother, every morning it was a ritual, going to get wood in the bush. Chop a few sticks down, haul them back, cut them up and then she'd start preparing food. My father was out hunting and fishing and trapping. He'd come home, we'd have a nice meal and pray. And that was our way of life. Next morning, same thing again...same thing with my father and grandfather on the trap line. They used to take us around as kids and we'd watch them. They never took any more than they needed. It was a day-to-day existence based on spiritual values.

But those days may be gone, I don't know.... We lose those things when we become urbanized. Is that the price we have to pay for our Indianness? I don't know. That's why my wife and I try to have at least one feast a month for our family. We try to go to a sweatlodge once a week, twice a month. It's not easy to go to the sweatlodge every day in the city. It's very hard to sometimes live a traditional way of life in the city. You've got all the fire and smoke regulations. You can't make a fire outside without a permit.

I think we still have the elders here to give us the guidance and faith and that's through the values we talked about. I think that's what makes the individual and the nation strong — trying to live a good life irregardless of the situation, respecting each other, sharing with each other. Trying to learn together, struggle together. Being kind to one another. Loving your own self, your own family. Being honest and pure.... I try to teach my own family first of all. Look within myself to see my weaknesses. Do a ceremony to strengthen those weaknesses....

I asked the old man why we had to go to sweatlodges, to fast, to smoke the pipe. He said, "Because if we were all perfect we wouldn't need those things anymore. It would be a very boring world if we were all perfect. We might as well go to heaven if it were that."

...Maybe that's why they tell us to smudge all the time. One of the greatest of all the ceremonies is the simplest one, that's the smudge. Because you are smudging your mind and mind is the gift that distinguishes us from the rest of creation. And God in his wisdom and knowledge allows us to behave the way we want to behave...to do whatever we want to do on earth. We want to get drunk, he allows us to get drunk. If you want to do good things, do good things. And that's the greatest teaching my grandparents taught us as a child. They allowed me to develop my own free will in a good way because they were the examples. And yet I was cut off by the residential school system and through the formal education system. It's not easy to go back to that way of life, to follow the spiritual principles. You almost have to be a saint and I know I'm not a saint. I know that. I make a lot of mistakes in life....

I just want to mention this today about our people because they, by whatever means, have been taken away from the traditional road. They have taken up some of the cultural characteristics of the white people that centre on economic gain, centre on power or speed. We have to be very careful as Native people about that. It's not to say we can't work for a living. But you have to learn how to balance that. ...balancing your life. Get to know as much as you can about where you come from. If you are a Native person, you were given a Native philosophy. How do you address that? Well you look within yourself first. It's an old teaching from the old people. See where you are, who are you? Where do you come from? Language is important. Group identity is important. Individual identity is important. I'm talking spiritual identity here: your Indian name, your clan, your colours, your tribe. Very important. You have to find those things, as a Native person those gifts were given to you. And then you heal yourself.

The simple answer for our people is to accept they are Indian. That's where we start. When you accept that, you are healed as far as being a Native person. But that's not the end of the line. You still have to complete the circle. Relearn the language, ceremonies and things like that. At the same time try to balance that spirituality with whatever work you are doing.

The theme of balancing the needs of modern life in the city with a traditional value system and spiritual integrity was common throughout the two days, especially when the group discussed the two communities. Another young man shared his experience of relearning the traditions in a small community:

Probably going out for my first year living off the land. Learning from pipe carriers and elders. Living the Indian way of life in a small Indian traditional community. They were willing to teach me about myself and that was my first process of self-actualization.

Some of the other participants in the circle also focused on education in different settings as a significant force that solidified their cultural identity. One young man went to an alternative high school in the urban centre that emphasized culturally relevant curriculum for Aboriginal students, including healing circles and teachings from elders. The young man spoke proudly of the high school as an extremely positive learning environment that enabled him and many other students to begin a healing and learning path that became the foundation of their Aboriginal identity.

Joe Duquette High School...we have healing circles in the morning. A lot of kids go in there and they don't even know who they are. They are ashamed of being Indian. When they go there they learn more about their culture and they start a healing process. A lot of them go into treatment and stuff like that.

Education was a source of empowerment for many people in the group when the place of learning was culturally appropriate and the curriculum relevant to their Aboriginal identity. Unfortunately, in mainstream institutions learning environments of this sort, where healing and learning are united, are quite rare. Because of the destructive, racist relationship that mainstream education has had historically with Aboriginal people, the work of healing and the work of learning are, in many ways, inseparable. For some people, like the students at this and similar schools, healing and education are done together; for others the elders serve the same function. Access to accurate history and other culturally relevant information is healing in itself for many people. For example this woman spoke of how she feeds her identity in a positive way through education:

My cultural has been improved and strengthened by me listening to oral traditionalists...because through them I have learned the real reason why women walk ten steps behind the men. And it was not because it was to take away from the woman, it was to protect them. And certain things like that. And it's adding to my cultural identity because I know why certain things happen the way they happen. And when I hear people saying, "Are we going to walk ten steps behind the men for the rest of our lives?", I'd be glad to walk ten steps behind any man because it seems for the past years that I've been married to my husband he's been walking ten steps behind me and I've been protecting him. [laughs] So it's added to my cultural identity because I know the reasons our people do the things they do.

For others, part of their healing path is necessarily a process of relearning a history and culture that does not omit the reality of Aboriginal people.

One of the other significant themes in the discussion of strengthening and enhancing cultural identity was "elders, family, people that practise the traditional way of life." In general,

befriending and being with other Aboriginal people was a source of identity affirmation for most people in all the learning circles, including this one. Some of the people in the Saskatoon treaty circle identified their family as an important foundation and support for their Aboriginal identity as well. For example, this woman said she felt her identity was strengthened by her work at a cultural centre for Aboriginal people and by her relationship with her father, who has been a consistent source of support and learning throughout her life.

I guess I would say that my culture has always been strong, it's always been there for me because I have a father that's an elder. I've always gone to him and he's always reminded me of who I am and where I come from.

Other members of the circle had been separated from their families for different reasons — adoption, residential school, family breakdown, geography — for many years and they stated that they now found strength in returning to those important relationships. One woman chose to live in her husband's territory in northern Ontario for 34 years and had only recently moved back to be with her own family in Saskatchewan. For others the distance was not so much physical as emotional:

I had to go back to losing touch with my family but I was able to deal with that by talking it out with my mother. And right now, though we have that closeness again, mother and daughter, but we are still working on it. I still feel a sense of loss like I'm on the road to recovery. And she still feels the same way too so we have a lot of work to do. Because after fifteen years I finally got to be with my mother.

This woman expressed great sadness at the loss of her once large family and yet some hope in beginning to rebuild relationships, beginning with her mother and one of her brothers who lived a more traditional life and offered her support in joining him to learn more.

In many of the learning circles participants expressed the importance of their role as parents teaching their children — this role enhanced the Aboriginal identity of many people. A man in the Saskatoon circle expressed a similar feeling:

The role I play as a father to my kids, because I know that the spiritual part of their life needs to be connected and they need to know the value and learn to balance in terms of being a contributing member of society and learning the spiritual part of their life and the physical and emotional well-being. But since my kid started getting in trouble with the law I realized he needs a connection.

Like the elder who told the group how he has monthly feasts to bring his family together to share and pray together, this man also expressed the importance of the family — or the parent/child relationship more specifically — as an environment to learn spiritual practices and values that are fundamental to one's identity as an Aboriginal person (see also the discussion of

family in an earlier section).

Positive public expressions of Aboriginal culture were something that different people in the circle also felt good about. For some it was going to pow wows or art exhibits, for others it was community celebrations and rituals. Two of the young men in the group felt empowered by using their own voice. For one it was "Singing pow wow in front of people to teach them about our culture." For the other young man it was more fundamental:

My voice. If I was scared to talk I wouldn't be proud of who I am. By talking to you, by using my voice, is showing that I am proud of who I am and that I will talk.

Some organizations and groups were also able to support the identity of people in this circle, for example, the Indian Métis Friendship Centre, Native Spiritual Voices — an organization for street people, Saskatchewan Treaty and First Nations Assembly — an urban organization, and the Indigenous Students Council lounge on the campus of Saskatchewan Indian Federated College.

Two Communities: Aboriginal and Mainstream

The following chart outlines some aspects of each community that the members in this learning circle identified as having a significant impact on their Aboriginal identity.

Aboriginal	Mainstream
family and friends (mostly +)	government institutions: justice (-), social services (-), control over life (-), INAC (-), provincial natural resources ministry (-), when supportive (+)
elders (+)	employment: when accessible (+), racism (-), lack of skills (-)
alcohol and drug abuse (-), recovery/AA/sobriety (+)	media: inaccurate portrayal (-)
tribal government/band council (50/50)	friends (+)
education: SIFC (+), residential school (-)	education: culturally relevant curriculum (+), residential school (-), SIFC (+), elementary and high school (-)
Bill C-31: divisive effect (-) political consciousness (+)	recreation (mostly +), contains some racism (-)
racism (-)	racism (-)
arts and crafts (+)	adopted family: ignorance and omission of

	Aboriginal identity (-), security (+)
spirituality (+)	abortion
church (mostly -)	prostitution (-)
hunting and fishing (+)	sexually transmitted diseases (-)
Oka crisis to raise political consciousness and pride in community (+)	employment equity programs: if effective (+)
cultural events (+), pow wows, feasts, ceremony and rituals	church: as source of confusion, division in community (-)
cultural teachings (+)	cultural differences: language, values, practices (-)

In discussion the group focused on the degree of conflict and compatibility they experience in their lives with respect to the two communities. Much of the discussion revolved around integrating the two cultures to arrive at a sense of balance that allows one to maintain a sense of integrity. This man expressed the issue well, using the resources of the urban centre for his livelihood and to help gain access to the cultural resources in his community:

I think I've learned to maintain a sense of balance. Because I've adjusted to the European way of doing things in terms of working for money but at the same time maintaining my heritage. Even though it is difficult because in the urban setting we don't practise a lot of our ceremonial part of our heritage. So my job helps me get back home to do that.

This woman emphasized the similarities in the cultures:

There's a lot of conflict but there's also a lot of compatibility. You take the positives from one side and the positives from the other side and you try and combine the two. You walk one trail. But there's going to be conflicts on that trail because of the difference in values.... The values are not so different but it's the way you prioritize them. Like there's not that much difference between the values white people have and what we have but they prioritize maybe the economy as more important than we do. But they also prioritize the family as important. To me that's a similarity, but it's where you prioritize it.

Most people reflected on their efforts to maintain the same balance. One woman talked about how she takes the best from the mainstream but she transforms these things to make them more culturally appropriate for her needs.

I take the best in the both worlds. Whatever I get from the mainstream I make it culturally appropriate so it will help me... I make them compatible for me to survive. Because I will change things, it may take time but I'm going to change them. For me, I have to fit in there. The thing isn't going to fit in me because I will get outcast if I try to get the world to fit in me. I have to fit in there some place but I'm going to make that foundation solid and strong so I'm not going to easily fall off.

For other people in the circle the integration of the two cultures was harshly forced on them as a result of being adopted into white families at an early age. This woman speaks of her adoption as a process that forced her, in order to survive, to learn the ways of the dominant culture. In her stories she expressed much pain and confusion as a result of many traumas throughout her life, including the experience of forced adoption:

There has been a lot of conflict because of what I felt as a Native person — when I remember back to the first six years of my life compared to...[being] forced into white society and I had to learn their ways fast or else die. So there was a lot of conflict because you get confused with who you are and what you're doing in this society. And you have to learn to adjust — you have to adjust yourself — your feelings and all your emotions. And as a child when you don't have your parents to guide you, you have to learn to manage on your own.

When I first got married and had children right away. Today my husband says, "I don't know how you taught your children how to love." Because I didn't learn love in my foster home. But you learn to adjust; when you are forced into a hostile environment you draw strength from previous relationships that you had. And one strong relationship that I remember I had as a child was with my Gookum. I remember her really strongly in my mind and how she taught me how to love. And so when I was in the foster home there was no emotional love or anything like that. So I remember my Gookum was the one who taught me how to love and I reflected that love onto my children and taught them how to love that way.

But yes, there was a lot of conflict inside myself trying to figure out who I was and what I was doing there and how I was going to survive in this world when I didn't have my family to support me. [Facilitator: Is there a balance possible?] I balance it. You're forced to make adjustments and now it's even getting so I feel healthier because I'm being connected with my reserve again. My brother's trying his hardest to get me to go back and live there — he's returned to the reserve. But yes you can balance. You can take the best of both worlds.

I lived in a negative environment in a foster home but I have to say that I did learn some good values from them. You have to live in society; so I had to learn time from them, you have to be on time for your appointments. Education, and those sort of things. And those are things that are helping me survive right now. So yeah I had a balance. It is possible.

Here is another woman who felt the isolation and confusion resulting from being separated involuntarily from her family and community. Today she strives to relearn the lessons of her culture but it is a struggle. Coming from a very large family, she now talks about relationships with a brother and her mother.

It's kind of hard right now... I grew up with my grandparents and was forced to go to school in the white world and get in with white people. It was hard for me, I learned to adjust to the white man's way but that's not what I wanted. So I had to go back to something that I knew I wanted but my family wasn't there when I

went back to the reserve. So I had to more or less learn on my own. Like struggle and fight to get back the values of the two. I still have a little bit on the white way but I'd rather go the other way. I still try to balance but it always seems that there is more influence this way than there is the Native. Because I never had the family to work with me. I've got a big family of sixteen and now there is only like me and my mom are trying to get our relationship together — that's a start, for me, to have that balance with the Native side.

But I've also got my white friends who I grew up with. But they're still both a part of my life. But I'm trying to go the Native way — get my culture and everything back — but it's hard. Especially moving to the city. It's something I've been struggling with but I know if I find that balance between the both of them I know that there's that road there that I can follow and it will be my choice which way to go to. I'm stuck in the middle and the roads are going in different directions. I seek help from elders, I no longer have my grandparents with me, but my brother and them are very traditional in every aspect. And they are bringing me back home back to where I originally came from. But I want to go that way but I want to stay where I am — so I'm stuck. It's totally up to me to decide which way I go.

When this woman spoke her frustration at being "stuck" was apparent.

Another woman spoke with more depth about the pervasive conflict in her life and what she was taught about the nature of conflict by her elders.

Conflict with mainstream society makes me consider and work on my values. My cultural values, my spiritual values. Because as a Native person I have to face conflict wherever I am — whether I'm in mainstream society or whether I'm back home in the Aboriginal society. And my values which I was taught by the elders, was that no matter what conflict you face, the people you have conflict with have good in them too. They are somebody's grandmother, they're somebody's mother. They're somebody's child and somebody loves them. So they have values that there can be love. So I find that I can balance and I have not learned to segregate myself because of who I am or because of my cultural identity. I was taught to be proud of who I am, of my culture, of my language. And I was always taught that no matter where I am it can fit in. As long as I retain a balance inside of myself. And it's me and how I present myself to the world that makes the difference. So when I'm in mainstream society I hold my head up high and I am proud of who I am and what my culture is. So there is a balance and you find it within yourself. Mainstream society is not going to give you that balance whether you ask them or not, they're not going to give it to you. You just have to work on it yourself.

Here again is the theme of balance that arose repeatedly in the discussion. Throughout the two days and in all the learning circles the themes of balance, integration, conflict and compatibility were, in many respects, the essence of what people were examining in their lives. For many, making sense of the two cultures was a painful and confusing affair; others expressed only mild stress in their efforts.

Recommendations

We, the treaty people of Saskatchewan, recommend that

1. We, as distinct sovereign nations, assert recognition of our inherent right of self-government within the spirit and intent of the treaties, through a harmonious working relationship of all nations, including the federal, provincial and local governments.

Conclusion

Among the important themes that arose in the Saskatoon treaty learning circle was the importance of the spirit and intent of the treaties. Many people in this group shared their frustration and resentment about the breakdown in treaty agreements that translates into the diminishment of their treaty rights to things such as health, education, economic support, hunting and fishing, and natural resources.

Two of the elders in the group were instrumental in offering a strong historical account of the background to many of the themes discussed over the two days. One of the women gave long passionate accounts from her own life about how colonialism was practised and how it affects her people up to the present time. Another man focused his words on the renewal process of healing from the effects of colonialism. He called for a spiritual renewal set in the traditional values and guided by the stories, rituals and ceremonies of their ancestors.

Lastly, the theme of balance often came up in this learning circle. The elders and some of the other participants expressed the importance of balancing the traditional values and practices with their needs in the modern urban society. One of the elders suggested that living with integrity didn't mean you have to quit your job but it does require you to examine the job you have (and the lifestyle you lead) and ensure that you are not employed in a situation at the expense of your identity as an Aboriginal person. His suggestion was that much of the pain and confusion some urban Aboriginal people endure results from trying to work in an environment that is contrary to their values and beliefs. From the reports of many people in this circle and in others it is clear that this balance is by no means an easy one to maintain in a society that is historically hostile to Aboriginal identity.

Acknowledgements

The research team of the Urban Perspectives Cultural Identity project would like to thank all participants in the ten learning circles for all they shared with us to make this endeavour possible. It has truly been a privilege to learn about their lives, and we feel honoured that they chose to take part. As well, we would like to thank all the individuals and organizations that helped co-ordinate the learning circles in each of the six regions. Without their efforts our job would not have been possible.