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## A Thunder's Wisdom

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

"*A Thunder's Wisdom*" draws on the craft of Indigenous storytelling to create, what is hoped, a compelling Indigenous knowledge translation product (Jackson & Masching, 2017). It is meant to re-story experiences of sadness and HIV as acts of survivance (Vizenor, 1994)—that is, it is a story that is focused on the idea of survival grounded within Indigenous identity. Drawing on earlier research findings that explored experiences of depression for Indigenous peoples living with HIV (Cain, et al., 2011; Cain, et al., 2013; Jackson, et al., 2008), this re-story is also best when considered as one researcher's literary interpretation of these interviews using a composite narrative approach (Jackson, Debassige, Masching, & Whitebird, 2015). It braids seventy-two individual stories into a single story and was meant to work as if stories are medicine, that teach, and that inspire new possibilities through Indigenous world views (Peacock, 2013). To accomplish this, principles of creative non-fiction were used and involved several steps: (1) Repeating readings of each of the seventy-two interviews; (2) using life-course theory grounded

by these 'real' experiences, the story was organized by compiling key substantive issues (i.e., finding out of HIV status; sadness and living with HIV, and moving forward, etc) from across these interviews; and (3) worked to embed these substantive issues within a well-known traditional story (i.e., thunderers and serpents). Although similar stories exist in most Indigenous cultures, these mythological creatures—who many continue to believe actually exist—were characters in a story I first heard as a child growing up. It was shared with me as a way of teaching about how best to understand one's personal struggles. This personal experience was bolstered, further developed, and adapted to this context by drawing on the anthropological and humanities literature (Anderson, 2011; Johnston, 1995; McKegney, 2007; Smith, 1995). Before reading, it is important to note that the names of characters appearing in the story, the residential HIV-positive Indigenous treatment lodge, and the advice offered and roles played by Elders are largely fictious. The study received approval from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board.

**Is That Thunder I Hear?**

> Even though my *Nookomis* (grandmother) died when I was ten, I can still hear her voice. "When we say their names aloud," she would say, slowly pronouncing so that I might learn, "*Ani-mi-kii* (Thunderer) and *Mis-he-be-shu* (Water Serpent)—it's those words that begin this story. It's an old … a very old story," she would add, "it's about the truth of things. It's all we are, really, those old stories. It survives—and like us—it survives because we share it. It can help us heal." When the sound of thunder began to rumble quietly off to the west, *Nookomis* continued, "Listen to that. Can you hear it? *Nana'b'oozo* (trickster) is calling *Animikii* for help. And that storm approaching," she would pause as much for effect as for clarity, "that's those *Manitous* (spirits) speaking to one another." Looking up at the darkening clouds off in the distance, *Nookomis* lowered her voice to a whisper and gestured towards the horizon. "See there, *Animikii* is close. I hear him coming. I can feel he's near. I bet you that the storm we hear coming is *Animikii* fighting *Mishebeshu.* You know, when that storm happens, out there over the lake, we'll be very still. We'll be quiet. We'll listen to that storm's *dae'b'wae* (truth). You know that *dae'b'wae*—well—that's those *Manitous* teaching us about *bimaadiziwin* (living well)."

The phone felt heavy in my hand as I pushed back from my desk and slumped down into my chair. Someone had just called to tell me our mutual friend, Edward, jumped to his death from his tenth-floor apartment. I won't lie to you. It felt like the air had been punched from my stomach. Edward was someone I met years earlier on the Indigenous HIV conference circuit and he would regularly ring to chat. Although our conversations were mostly focused on plain-old catching up, sometimes we also shared our struggles of living with HIV. Over the course of several years, as a way of trying to understand why he was prone to such consuming sadness, Edward would tell me bits of his life history. When he was young, Edward and his family got caught in the 60s Scoop. It's that infamous time in Canadian history when many Indigenous children were taken from their families and often placed in foster homes or adopted out to non-

Indigenous families. Edward's family struggled with poverty, partied too much, and often left Edward alone to fend for himself. When the child protection workers finally came, he was stolen and placed with a *zhaaganaash* (English-speaking, Caucasian) family. Although awareness of the importance of cultural pride has slowly improved, Edward's new 'family' didn't yet fully appreciate the value of keeping Edward connected to his *Mi'kmaq* culture. They didn't understand that a sense of connection—that relationships to his family, community, to the land, and to all the spiritual entities that live in the cosmos—were essential to his health and wellbeing. Having never learned his *Mi'kmaq* culture, Edward's emotional pain ran deep. It often festered, coloured his taste for life, and Edward struggled to dislodge it without ever fully succeeding.

As an adult, Edward worked hard to reclaim his culture, to receive teaching from Elders, and to learn how to practice the sacred teachings through ceremony. It's because Edward threw himself into learning about his culture that he understood its importance better than anyone. "Without my cultural identity," he once told me, "I'm just dead. I'm so dead inside. I think I'm this way because the only thing I can think about is how angry I am at both my birth and adopted families, how angry I am at the world, at how angry I am at everybody." I treasured our visits. Even though we both struggled with feelings of disconnection from culture, our talks always helped me feel less alone, more connected, more in awe at the beauty of our respective Indigenous cultures. Indeed, hearing of his death, I was left wondering whether a stronger sense of connection to his culture might have helped Edward heal. As I contemplated this, for a few moments, I began to slowly and sadly realize that Edward likely never managed to find the connection he really needed. Culture might have sustained him, held him up, and might have provided him some comfort.

It was a doubly sad day for me learning of Edward's untimely death as his suicide reminded me of my own past struggles. In fact, Edward's life story is a sadly commonplace and ordinary one. His story, like my own, was remarkably similar to many of the men and women whom I met on the Indigenous HIV conference circuit. Like Edward's, like the lives of many other Indigenous men and women, my life was once filled with partying and wild sex with far too many anonymous partners. They are things I've done, things I experienced, that sometimes still have the power to make me feel worthless. I understand today that my erratic and careless behavior was driven by a sense of never being enough, not for anyone, and least of all, not for myself. These feelings of worthlessness were wedged into my unconsciousness and propelled me into a life of unhealthy behaviors and poor decisions. Those feelings of worthlessness almost always came with the same niggling thoughts of ending my life. But somehow, deep down, I knew that I wouldn't ever try to commit suicide. Nevertheless, it scared me to be so close to those feelings, to always struggle with them. I just couldn't help but feel them.

It was through the Indigenous HIV community that I became open to the possibility that, like Edward, I could begin my journey to be more firmly connected to the vibrant and healing *Anishinaabe* (the peoples) culture that I was born into. Even though Edward never quite found the solace he looked for, his life and his friendship propelled me in that direction. It took learning of his death for me to refocus, once again, on my own healing journey, to work like Edward did,

to reclaim my culture. That was the one thing I could do to remember and honour Edward's life—for all that he'd given me.

Almost ten years ago, and long before I met Edward, I checked myself into an Indigenous-run residential healing lodge in southern Ontario at the urging of my family doctor. It was the first program of its kind, catering to people living with HIV who struggled with a variety of mental health issues. Although I was feeling nervous about being at this healing lodge, on my first night, attending dinner in the cafeteria, I sat down at a table with three old timers by the names of Bill, Jared, and Rob. It turned out to be a good choice too! They had been to this healing lodge before and over dinner, we shared a bit of our lives with one another.

It was Bill, a skinny, older Cree guy from northern Manitoba, who first suggested to me that, if I truly wanted to heal, I should get into 'tomorrow's talking circle', "'cause that my friend, will be your first full step out of the shadows."

Agreeing with Bill, Jared chimed in. "Yeah man, channel your energy into something good instead of negativity—and pray."

Even Rob, who I later learned liked to listen more than talk added, "It's up to us to create our own reality, so make the most of your time here." And I wanted this. I want this more than anything. I wanted to learn more about my culture. I wanted to learn how to activate this knowledge through ceremony and practice. Edward's recent death continued to ring like thunder in my ears—it now seemed like he had gotten himself trapped in the battle between *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu.* Without his culture to help him understand, he bumped up against those *manitous* and lost the story of his life.

Edward's story, one might say, was about how unfathomable sorrow could get blocked deep in one's heart. Although sadness was something Edward had lived with since being taken from his family and placed into child protective custody, he once told me how much worse it had been since he was diagnosed with HIV. "Since I've had this news, it's been more, I don't know, hard to cope with. I'm feeling down in the dumps a lot. My feelings of sadness 'seems' to have increased." But as I reflected on the kind of person Edward was, what rose to mind was that he was a good man who lived a fairly simple and uncomplicated life. He was a man of pure heart. Some would say he was generous to a fault. Thinking about Edward made me wonder whether being Indigenous mattered when he was faced with his own profound grief? Did he fully understand the violent way colonialism had shaped his life? Most of all, I wondered if things could have been different if he had his family and was able to truly reconnect with his community and nation. Would having learned the power of his culture have helped him heal? It seemed, at least on the surface, that Edward occupied that 'racialized' space reserved for Indigenous people struggling with life—it's sometimes a space we create for ourselves, but more often than not, it's simply space created for us by a colonial society that seeks to confine, restrict, and leave us languishing in our unhappiness.

**It's Where We Live**

> "But," *Nookomis* explained, "to understand this story, you gotta live the land that is in you. It's where this story belongs. You are of the land. You are one and the same." She lowered herself on shaky knees to the level of the water at the edge of the lake. "It begins here," she said, "in this underworld. It's where *Mishebeshu* lives." Standing up, *Nookomis* continued. "That's the sky realm," she pointed, "Up there. That's where *Animikii* lives. But here," she said, with her arms spanning out towards the lake and then back to the beautiful grove of trees that bordered the lake, "all this here is the land, our earthy home. It's where we live—where it's best for us." And offering a clue to the mystery of our existence, she continued, "All these directions, what's above, what's below—there's this energy that connects everything. It's this energy that keeps us healthy. This place takes care of us. It all works together. And we are meant to care for her too, our Mother Earth. It has a bottom that holds us and a top that covers us. All these things protect, shield, and, well, they are meant to keep us safe. Everything, seen and unseen, is held together by this energy. Everything works together as one thing. Life … good living, well," *Nookomis* pausing and searched for the right words, "it's about this lived sense of connection."

Just as breakfast was finishing up at the beginning of my first full day at the treatment lodge, I heard our counsellor, another *Nookomis* calling out from the front of the cafeteria. "*Aaniin*, *boozhoo*" (hello, greetings), she said with a beautiful ear-to-ear smile. "Come for a walk, down by the lake. I've got an *aadizookaan* (traditional story) for you. Let's go offer some tobacco, smudge, and share some of our stories with one another. Let's go talk about what brought us here—okay? So, let's go smudge and cleanse ourselves."

Although I it was still early in the morning, the air was already heavy, unmoving, and a thick hot moisture hung in the air. The day's forecast was calling for an early afternoon cold front, approaching from the west. The forecaster warned that when the cold front finally hit the warm air, it would produce booming thunder, spectacular lightening, and a thick, heavy rain.

But for now, hearing the counsellor greet us, I smiled, for she reminded me of my own *Nookomis* who was fond of saying, "Thunderstorms are so much more. Those storms are letting us know powerful beings are among us—the *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu* —and this is good. You know, those *Manitous*, they affirm our relationship with them and to one another. They remind us about connection." She also liked to add that those *Manitous* come to help. "You know those *Manitous*, they see all over this land. They have the power to see whether everything's alright." *Nookomis* was someone recognized as a traditional *debaajimojig* (storyteller). "A*adizookaan,*" she reminded me, "are our medicine. When we share sacred stories, even when we simply listen, they can heal us. They remind us of our *Anishinaabe* ways. Stories affirm our identities and we share these sacred stories over and over because if we don't, well, it's a neglectful thing." Without traditional stories helping a people to learn *Anishinaabe* knowledge, *Nookomis* taught me, we might find ourselves struggling, confused, and flailing about like fish out of water.

This counsellor, not unlike my own *Nookomis*, was a short, wrinkled, older, red-skinned lady whom everyone also called *Nookomis.* This other *Nookomis,* like my grandmother, was also a storied traveler in our multi-leveled universe—a gifted and respected traditional *debaajimojig*. It was through stories that she provided vivid descriptions of the ways the universe layers itself and the ways it works as a cohesive whole. She told us of the characters in those stories whose role is to guide and teach us, characters like *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu*. I was often reminded of the close relationship between these sacred stories and my own personal experiences. "Stories," my own *Nookomis* was fond of saying, "offer practical advice about living well. They express the nature of our *Anishinaabe* reality. They give our lives meaning." In words that I have since learned, stories help to decolonize the mind and spirit in ways that bolster *bimaadiziwin*. "Stories open space to think differently" my *Nookomis* often said. "If we listen deeply to the main thrust of those stories, they offer guidance about how to live a more fully connected relationship with everything that makes up our reality."

The healing lodge was situated on the southern shores of *Naadowei-Gichigami* (Lake Huron), and in the morning's drenching humidity, it seemed that this great lake spread itself out in all directions, flat as any mirror, frozen in place. Off in the distance, rising towards the hill bordering the healing lodge, stood a large grove of birch, cedar, and pine trees. With the light humid breeze gently blowing off the lake, you could hear those trees rustling up against each other—checking in and visiting one another—they too were alive and connected. I desperately wanted to be like those trees. I no longer wanted to numb myself with alcohol, with sex, or with drugs. I didn't want to miss any more of this land's grand lessons. I wanted to stand tall like those trees! I wanted my relatives, to check in and visit, just as those trees were doing with one another. "Those trees have a consciousness that speak, you know, they have many things to share, many things to teach," my own *Nookomis* shared. I was learning that my *Nookomis,* like the healing lodge counsellor, always managed to coax the 'real me' to the surface.

This is exactly, what I need, I thought. Somewhere natural, like this place. It's space where the colonial damage done to me could safely find a steady surface. The land, all the life it contained, could be so profoundly healing. Like the counselor, my *Nookomis* would often gently encourage me. "Bring it out into the light," she would say. "Let those memories finally breathe the fresh air. It's healing to share. Don't try to hide in it." Encounters with these grandmothers always seemed to leave me feeling like I'd just encountered a powerful Warrior—someone whose words were like an arrow shot high into the sky, only to fall back again to S*hkaakaamikwe* (Mother Earth). They were words that never failed to cause me to sit up straight, listen, absorb a lesson, and then propel me in a new direction.

When our talking circle group arrived at the lake, with *Nookomis* still and always smiling, it seemed that everyone began to sense that this wise woman deserved our mindful presence, our love, our respect, the full truth of our lives, our trust, our courage, and our humility. As I returned her smile, my eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of the thunderstorm predicted in the morning radio weather report. Nookomis instructed us all to lower ourselves close to where the earth met the water, reminding us of when we were children, receiving a first lesson in respect and humility. Each one of us were encouraged to offer the water, the land, our surroundings, and

*Nookomis* herself, a handful of traditional tobacco. After we each had had our turn, *Nookomis* said, "I have this vision of survivance I want to share with you. It's a story that might help us re-think and re-story ourselves. It's a story, I hope, that will help you reconsider the violence that colonialism caused in your life." Gesturing with her arms spread out towards the lake, she nodded at us. "It's the story of *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu* and of an epic battle that plays out over *Naadowei-Gichigami*."

**Introducing Animikii**

> "Who is *Animikii*? Well, he's this powerful *Manitou,*" my *Nookomis* began. "He serves S*hkaakaamikwe.* Those Thunderers, you know, well, they've created the clouds they hide behind. It was *Kitchi-Manitou* (Great Spirit, Creator), answering the prayers of *Nana'b'oozo* (trickster)*,* who called on *Animikii* to care for Mother Earth." Sensing the need to slow down, to check in *Nookomis* asked, "Aren't those *Animikii* clever? You know," she continued, "*Animikii* provides *Shkaakaamikwe* rain when she is thirsty, keeping her fresh and fertile." *Nookomis* then turned to look at the woods bordering the lake, "Those *Animikii*, with lightening flashing from their eyes, they use their wings to fan the fires that help regenerate the bush." Stopping, with a solemn look on her face, she added, "So, you see, we owe them our respect—not simply 'cause they care for *Shkaakaamikwe*—but we owe them respect 'cause they also possess the power to destroy."

The healing lodge counsellor, *Nookomis,* began again. "To understand why we experience sadness, why we've used alcohol or drugs, why we are angry for having been stolen, or why we've shared our bodies indiscriminately, it's important for us to understand who *Animikii* is and their role in the *Anishinaabe* world view." As I listen to this *Nookomis*, my eyes are drawn skyward, I watched a *migizi* (eagle) dive towards the water. When *migizi* was only two feet above the lake, heading east towards the shore, I could see the spread of her wings open as wide as possible. Noticing my gaze, *Nookomis* laughs out loud. "Looks like *Nana'b'oozo* beat me to the punch and summoned *Animikii.* Perhaps," she continued, "he's got a message for us from *Kitchi-Manitou* about *bimaadiziwin*."

Not yet believing, I began to think, "No, *migizi* just has her eyes on those large invasive lake carp. She's likely hunting food for her babies." Her wings were now almost horizontal to the earth, her body long and majestic, her bright white head contrasting to the dark brown on her neck and tail. Perhaps *Nookomis* knew I didn't quite yet believe. Her response made me blush. "Oh, that *Animikii* is real enough. It's so important," *Nookomis* told us, "that we develop a respectful relationship with these powerful beings. Without relationship, we won't be able to live in good ways." Sensing the need to reassure us, *Nookomis* also added, "*Animikii* is charitable. *Animikii's* brings balance and harmony. The work that he performs, well, it helps connect the spiritual energy of the upper world with the energy of the lower world. *Animikii* makes our struggles visible by means of the thunderstorm." Laughing, Nookomis added, "He's like us. He's real. You know, look at those clouds, up there above the lake. Make your own struggles visible,

so *Animikii* might see. Share your sadness, anger, and share what it's like to languish outside of culture. When we share like this, it's possible with *Animikii* help's to reconnect ourselves."

Even though it was our first day at the lodge, upon hearing this, we began to feel considerably more at ease. As the nervousness we were experiencing began to slowly dissipate, our healing group became intensely focused on sharing what it was like to live with unrelenting sadness. Everyone seemed to want a turn to speak. The kind of stories we heard that day were feelings of profound sadness, anger and grief from having been ripped from our families and our community. For many of us, we revealed feelings connected with colonial violence in ways that predated life with HIV. For others, the sadness came in stories about learning we contracted HIV. Sadness was connected to how things got layered by colonialism—like the layered stories we held within us about being treated badly for being Indigenous, for abusing ourselves by using street drugs or drinking too much alcohol, for being two-spirit, and for being HIV-positive. Because of all of this, sadness, it seemed, was the only thing life offered to us. These feelings made up our 'normal' existence. It seemed like these stories have always been part of us—our lives were cruelly twisted by sadness in ways that have made breathing, that have made good living, an almost impossible feat.

The first to share was Bill. He introduced himself as *Coast Salish*, sixty years old, and living with his wife of 25 years. Bill said that—fifteen years ago both he and wife were diagnosed HIV-positive. A survivor of residential schools, an alcoholic and user of drugs, HIV served only to make him feel more angry. He was angry at the untimely prospect of a much shorter life. Bill told us that he simply didn't know "how to deal with these feelings. I—my old lifestyle was—I would—I would fight, and drink heavy, and do a lot of drugs. That was the only way I knew how to deal with it. I don't even feel good anymore," Bill added, "about going back to the reserve. I feel like they treat me like a leper." Alluding to the fact that "like a leper" was typical of the way he'd always been treated, Bill continued, "Even when I was small there was a lot of this sort of prejudice in the town. People on our reserve were always considered to be so dirty, to have lice, and they had whatever, they talked like they had, what they consider like a Native accent, the way they talked sort of slow and kind of like—you know—backwards kind of people—and that's how they were treated, and we lived in the town."

Bill's anger inspired stories from other participants. Jared, two-spirit, Cree, shared how it had been twenty years since he had been diagnosed with HIV. He was raised in his culture, was active in the two-spirit movement, but struggled with anger from HIV. "That's the extent of how depressed I am," Jared said. "I get violent, malicious, spiteful. The other side of the depression is just complete deadness." Jared believed he got HIV participating in the gay party circuit, cooking heroin and shooting up with other guys. Having trouble understanding the complexity and intensity of his emotions, he continued with tears streaming down his face. "I feel like I'm worthless, that I can't really do things right. In the last couple of weeks, that's how I've been feeling, and I have been feeling it right to the bone. I just don't know what's going on. My mind is so messed up. I don't know if I'm angry or sad or happy sometimes. It's mostly anger and unhappiness though. Um, yeah, just messed up. Right messed up in the head." Highlighting how things came to a head, Jared added, "Yeah, last year after a guy broke up with me, my heart was

crushed and everything. I went there but then when I was there I realized, oh, my God, I felt I had to hide it a lot and I couldn't tell them the truth of why I was there to deal with the loss of that one person. And it felt, it was sad because I couldn't talk about it. It was very difficult because I didn't feel welcomed there, because I'm two-spirited."

Moved by seeing Jared in tears, it was Rob who spoke up next. Rob was a thirty-six-year-old *Métis* man who had been living with HIV for the past 17 years. "Oh, you're lucky. I could not, I basically didn't—I had to learn how to cry—I had to learn how to be angry. I could not show anger". Hearing stories of anger, Rob shared similar experiences, but in his case, his was anger turned inward. "I hate myself sometimes for being sick. For letting myself … for letting that happen to me. I thought before that I wasn't angry, I didn't get angry, and when I found out I had HIV, I didn't get angry, I didn't get … you know, I didn't freak out or nothing, I just acted like, you know, ok you have it, deal with it. So, maybe that's what I'm dealing with now, the anger. I don't know." Continuing to unpack his story, he added, "You know, this is the second time I've been in treatment. The first time I went, last year, they actually told me I'm too messed up to heal right now." Chuckling to himself, he continued. "They said, 'this program is not right for you.' And it was a Native Healing Lodge and they told me that this program is really not good for you right now because you're just—you're more messed up than we thought, pretty much.'" Rob was laughing harder now. Humour, Rob said, was his way of keeping himself from going crazy. For Rob, like for many Indigenous peoples, humour had the power to blunt the anger and softened the hard edge of emotional pain. Laughter was Rob's emotional lifeline. Even though the use of humour in such a serious situation seemed odd, we all accepted that humour served a good purpose. Rob added, "I liked being the clown. I loved having the centre of attention. But really, deep inside, I was sad. So, I would extend myself beyond what I was capable of doing and I would get nothing back and this perpetuated even more negative reactions and negative things continually happening all the time. So, it was embarrassment, like I said, [I would get] scared, and that would be embarrassing." Rob's voice trailed off, "Yeah, ummm."

Even though I understood Rob used humour to soften sharp edges, I had to add more seriously, "Yeah, me too. When I got back here to this healing lodge, this nice gentleman asked me, 'well, what do you think caused you to go out and drink again?' And I said, 'well, I guess I wanted to. I wanted to drink. I was getting tired of being alone all the time, and I didn't have support and I was tired of this and tired of that.' But my counsellor, that nice gentleman, turned around to me and he said, 'You know what? I don't think so. I think you gave up on yourself. That's why you started drinking again.' And he was right 'cause I then looked at it totally differently. I hadn't seen it that way at all before. After a while I thought about what he said and that's why I relapsed the first time—because I gave up."

*Nookomis* responded encouragingly to our stories, "You know, *Animikii* isn't simply myth. He's real. We get to interact with him, to be in relationship with him, through that thunderstorm that is approaching. But he can also exist in our words, in the testimony each of you have offered," and beginning to smile, Nookomis continued, "*Chi-miigwech* (thank you very much) for sharing your stories—that took honesty and courage." Nookomis told us that she had said *chi-miigwech* because it's important that we understand that when we work to represent *Animikii* in our life

world—in our stories about how we feel, here, now—that what we're really participating in is the refinement and the extension of our cultural beliefs, values and sacred teachings. "It's through sharing that we're all now walking that Red Road. When we share, we help ourselves heal. We can even help others heal with our personal stories! But," she continued, "life is a kaleidoscope. So, when we explore this part of the story, it's important to remember that we've done so though a lens of sorts. We have to be careful that we might talk about *Animikii* in only this way, that we might limit our vision. What we have here is a partial story—there is more to this story, there are more characters, more events to add to the timeline." *Nookomis* paused for a minute, seemed to reflect, and then continued. "If I haven't already told you, it's always important to remember that *Animikii* depends on *Mishebeshu* the water serpent. The two make each other who they are, and they provide each other their purpose in life. In other words, the part of story that focuses on *Animikii* shields us from what *Mishebeshu* might offer. Their relationship with one another—*Animikii* and *Mishebeshu*—that relationship will work to protect, to balance, to be restored. Let's explore that! Okay?"

**Introducing Mishebeshu**

> "Do you want to know about *Mishebeshu* now*?"* my *Nookomis* asked pointing to the middle of the lake, "You know, that underwater monster who comes from out that big hole out there, at the bottom of the lake? Once, years ago, my Dad and I spent the day fishing on the lake. It was very hot and humid when we dropped our fishing lines, and when we did, out ahead of our boat, we noticed what looked like this big black sturgeon. Its back would break the water's surface before it dove. This went on for some time—again and again—it would dive and surface, dive and surface. We sat quietly in the boat and watched. But you know what? It wasn't a sturgeon, 'cause this thing, this serpent, it had a triangular back, almost diamond shaped." *Nookomis* raised her hands to the top of her head to demonstrate. "It had small horns that protruded from the top of its head. And it was larger than any sturgeon we had ever seen, probably fifteen or twenty feet long. It was frightening 'cause that fish was much bigger than our boat. I asked Dad if we could leave. I wanted so badly to get off the water, get back on shore, and it couldn't happen quickly enough, you know? But Dad, oh he knew better, alright. He understood *Mishebeshu* in a way I didn't. He told me, '*Mishebeshu* is allowing us safe travel on the water.' My father was a straight-shooting, matter-of-fact kind of guy, and when *Mishebeshu* surfaced again, in a voice full of quiet wisdom, he told me, 'Now there's a gift for your eyes. You know,' with sparkling eyes now fully ablaze, he said, '*Mishebeshu* is a powerful being. It's 'cause of this that we might think he's the terrible one. But, he's not. He's not so bad. You'll see.'" Offering yet another riddle, *Nookomis* continued. "That name *Mishebeshu,* well, it suggests medicine. That's what my Dad told me that day, that *Mishebeshu* has extraordinary power, just like *Animikii*. That medicine, well, *Mishebeshu*, he's also about giving our lives meaning. It happens through that struggle—when

> *Mishebeshu* battles *Animikii*—it's that battle that helps to 'right' the imbalance in the world."

After listening to our stories, the counsellor *Nookomis* shared a bit of her own story of survival. Long before becoming a counsellor, she too had many horrific experiences that flowed as a consequence of colonialism—the worst of which was her abduction by the state and church into a residential school at the age of only eight. Having experienced this as a profound loss of culture, family, and connection, she told of her own sadness, her own struggles to be a traditional person, and of eventually picking up and using alcohol to cope. Nookomis smiled and added, "That's when I hitched a ride on the back of *Mishebeshu* and I traveled with him to the edges of the known universe." For those of us who gathered by the lake that morning, hearing the counsellor's own story, inspired us to share again in a second round of the talking circle. "Tell *Kitchi-Manitou* how you understand those feelings of sadness. How are those feelings connected to your experience?"

It was Bill who, again, first spoke up. "I wasn't raised Aboriginal and I wasn't allowed to hang around with—believe it or not, me being Native—with Native people." Sharing how his family didn't teach him his culture, he continued, "You know being Native, and having my culture, and traditions and stuff. I don't know anything about that! I don't know anything about that at all. I'm from the north. And my band doesn't have—they don't have—they're starting to come around, but I don't know anything about my tradition, traditional or, I just, I just feel like I'm lost." Not quite finishing his sentences, like parts of his stories were cut out of him, it was eventually HIV that provided Bill with an important reason to explore his culture: he desperately needed to be spiritually strong in order to live with the physical illness. Bill described what it was like finally finding space in his life to reclaim culture. "My very first time I picked up an eagle feather and I was like wow! Just this overwhelming feeling of joy that came over me." With tears streaming hot down his face, Bill continued, "Wow, I'm holding the feather of an eagle! It was so powerful being Indian it was just … and the eagle feather I got was from the Chief. Now for me it was, wow, okay, an Indian chief gave me an eagle feather. I said, 'whoa', ok … I still have the eagle feather today. I want … I'll die with that feather. I will die with that feather on me."

For Jared, like many others, crushing poverty, housing instability and unemployment were what devastated him most living with HIV—they were his serpent monsters. Following Bill, Jared shared how the financial end of things affected him. "The money bit … well, that is extremely depressing, because I'm not making the money I used to. I'm living below poverty now, on my pension, and I just feel that the opportunities aren't there for me anymore, you know? Because of my physical body. I don't know anything else but how to use my physical self. So, I'm just sort of going to try to reeducate myself. Just start, start over again." Prior to coming out and living as a two-spirit man, Jared once had a girlfriend and they started a family together—a daughter and a son. "I can't do nothing for my kids 'cause I don't have the money, that's another thing. 'Cause I don't have money to do things for, for family. Makes me feel … I don't know, less … less as a father? You know, kids need stuff, and my girl is having a hard time, and … with her boyfriends, and I just feel really bad. I can't do nothing." Expressing how he'd love to change this, Jared

added, “if there was a way of bettering myself financially, I would, ‘cause I believe that if you have money, you know, you can make a change in your life. But if you don’t have money, you’re limited to what you can do.”

Following Jared, Rob had a different story to share about how he understood his feelings of sadness. “When I think of depression, it isn’t so much related to HIV in the beginning as it is now, but it’s mostly due to coming from a family of alcoholics. Verbal abuse, emotional abuse, stuff like this. So I never had the support as a child.” Adding how this wasn’t the only experience that drove his experience of feeling overwhelming sadness, Rob added, “It’s a mixture of things, it’s just a whole combination of stuff. I had a tough childhood, but I had some good. Well, I had a dream when I was a kid that I was supposed to be a hockey player and I was a pretty good hockey player when I was a kid. But I didn’t have any support there either. And I was abused as a kid, and I learned as a kid, just, I think I’m still sad about being a really crappy kid and having a really crappy childhood!” Turning towards the sky and as much to *Nookomis* as to the Creator, Rob continued, “You know some of our community members were able to heal themselves and emerge as well people, as healers. I know this one guy, ‘like you, *Nookomis’,* he works to help our Native brothers to deal with the issues of HIV and AIDS—but in the prisons. So, we can emerge and heal ourselves from these experiences and through sheer determination of will, you know. And for me that sheer determination of will is, you know, it’s, you’re never, they’re never going to do that again to you. You will emerge and ‘you’ will not be suppressed and oppressed by people, I think this is the worst thing that can happen to us. It’s like someone holding our spirit, holding our spirit in a cage you know?”

It was then my turn. The only stories I had about depression were connected to the drugs and alcohol that I used. It came, for me, as a result of being sexually abused when I was a kid by my uncle. “To be depressed for me, I just don’t know how to deal with it. My old lifestyle was that I would—I would—fight and drink heavy, and do a lot of drugs.” This included becoming very promiscuous, I told them. “I got into a really depressed state, I wanted to um … I wanted to die, so I … so I got very self-destructive. I started doing things to hurt myself. I decided to die because I didn’t want to live anymore, so I would put myself in dangerous situations with bikers. I’d try to get shot, I’d try to get stabbed.” Unfortunately, the medication to treat HIV only compounded feelings of sadness. “I was on a drug called Sustiva, which caused a lot of psychological issues to come up, issues of thinking that I was being persecuted by people, my parents, my family, my friends. I became very paranoid, very, very, angry, malicious, mean…all the exact opposite of how I usually am. Very unhappy.” But, I told them, things were beginning to change. Maybe it was age. Maybe it was a growing maturity, but I just started to “kind of grow, grow out of it, type of thing, to me. There’s … there was a time in my life when alcohol was—I mean when I could really—it’s hard to believe in a guy as young as me, but I mean I drank, and… drank and drank. Had every symptom of the…the classic alcoholic right from you know, right from the top to the very bottom; pushing bottles around in a cart [chuckles] to go get more booze type of thing.” I laughed. “It sounds funny, but it isn’t. It’s really tragic.”

*Nookomis* began her story again, “You know, it’s those Thunderers who have the power. They will work to right the imbalance that *Mishebeshu* has caused in our lives. When those *Manitous*

come together, when *Mishebeshu* breaks that water, *Animikii* will dive toward them. You know," *Nookomis* continued, "I want you to also begin to understand that many of your shared stories aren't the result of who you are as a person." Pausing, *Nookomis* added, "You know, those social conditions you spoke to, loss of culture, housing, and what not, these things aren't your fault. They are rooted in colonialism. You are not to blame. Colonialism results in a cosmic imbalance that is meant to cause us personal harm, you know? The Thunderers—those grandfathers—they work constantly to protect us from this imbalance and from the harm we cause ourselves because of that imbalance."

At that moment, it started to rain and thunder, and our small group ran and took cover under the nearby gazebo. You could see the lightening, still off at a distance, getting closer. "Maybe it's time to tell you about that storm approaching from the west. Here, it's important to keep in mind that the storm—that the battles it depicts between *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu*—is not a contest between good and evil, light and dark, or right and wrong. Oh no, it's not. It's a Eurocentric error to view the battle that way. That storm. That battle. I find it more helpful to think of the storm as an epic battle to bring back balance. That's what those Manitous bring us when it storms. They are teaching us to reconnect, to be in relationship, that the land and all her beings are here to assist us with our troubles."

**Storm on the Lake**

> Looking towards the sky, my *Nookomis* asked, "What about that approaching storm? That sound of thunder in the distance, it reminds me of this story we share only in summertime. It's a story, the old ones told me, about something that happened a long time ago. It's about this man, a hunter in his community, who was trying to get across the lake to where the wild game had migrated. The hunter was walking along, trying to figure how he'd get quickly across, 'cause he didn't have his canoe with him. He walked for some time before he came to this big black snake lying near the shore. Although that snake was frightening, the hunter was thinking about the hunger his community might suffer if his hunt was unsuccessful, so he guardedly asked the snake, 'Will you carry me across the lake? I need to hunt over there, where the animals have gathered.' Much to his surprise the snake agreed, 'Yes, I can take you. But those thunder clouds, they worry me. They look menacingly black and I'm afraid of thunder and lightning. Will you tell me if it thunders or begins to lightening while we cross?' The hunter promised he would and with that he climbed up on the snake's back. Once the hunter felt secure, that snake began its slimy slither into the warmth of the lake water. As they went along, the clouds began to darken even more. The thunder, once distant, began to rumble deeper and louder than it had before. The storm was almost over top of them. And with that, a fierce light hissed and crackled in a series of volleying flashes and began hitting the now churning water. Whimpering with a fear that quickly closed in on all sides, feeling trapped, the snake said to the man, 'Wait, I think I hear *Animikii.* It feels like he's very close. I can hear his low roar grow

> stronger. I can even feel the electricity. We better get ourselves out of the water, and quick.' Not waiting for the hunter to respond, the snake turned around and began to head back to shore from where they had come. Just as they reached the shore, at a spot near the rocks where the hunter could leap to safety, a stroke of lightening hit the snake. The snake withered in pain, curled up, wrapping around itself in a tight coil. But this protective move had absolutely no benefit. The hunter was shocked to see the lightening hitting the snake again just as he reached the rocks near the shore, and it broke the snake into a million pieces. Those snake pieces, well they, too, began swimming about before finally making land. So, you see, that great black snake wasn't killed after all. His pieces saved him. They turned into many smaller snakes that we continue to see all around here, even today."

Back in this realm, under the cover of the gazebo, this other *Nookomis* brought our attention to the clouds over this lake. The clouds were coalescing, darkening, and beginning to menacingly roll over top each other. You could see, hear, and feel those clouds gathering strength. Standing at the shore and looking west out across the lake, *Nookomis* proclaimed, "Wow, that *Animikii* is truly a magnificent *Manitou*! Feel that wind, look at those black clouds billowing over one another, and see that wall of rain approaching, trying to make shore. I've been listening to your stories about feeling sad, or angry, or about being confused, or not being able to feel anything at all. And I was thinking, perhaps *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu* will help us remember relationship and connection." Don't we all want to experience healing? Through my own struggles—like that thunder and lightning—I can tell you that those thunderstorms happen all the time around here. The wise old ones told me, 'these battles happen again and again—they are like life, a circular thing. Its nature that reminds me how it might be foolish to seek resolution—but just like *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu* have done—we are here to find ways of bringing balance into our lives. Let's allow *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu* to show us."

No sooner had *Nookomis* spoken those words then the dark clouds, heavy with rain and the weight of the world, began to dip dangerously low over the lake. Clearly, everything was aligning towards the moment. "Lay your tobacco again," urged *Nookomis*. "It's time to ask *Animikii* for help. He'll come help you do battle with that part of yourself—that *Mishebeshu*—that keeps you disconnected and unbalanced."

As we finished laying our tobacco, the thunder clapped loudly, lightning flashed, and this brought heavy, unrelenting rain. As the thunderstorm played out before us, it created space for our own flood gates to open. Everyone in the talking circle, it seemed, had something to share about their journey to find balance. It was Bill who first spoke. "I really know that you are telling us what we really need to know. And it's always, it's who you are kind of … what happened to you when you were small kind of thing. Why a lot of people get depressed, because they are hiding a lot of shame, guilt or whatever, right? And so then you leave that unattended, you end up getting depressed, because it bothers you, and you don't know why, and some people are like, "why, why, why?" Because they don't really know like you know, about themselves, their inner selves, why. But, ignoring it … will take its toll."

"How do we connect?" *Nookomis* responded. "How do we find balance? Share your wisdom! You know this. Those ancient ones, they planted these things in you long ago, it's in your blood memories. Dig for it. It's already a part of you. That storm—that battle between *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu*—that battle, that thunderstorm, it reminds me, it teaches me that I'm also to be in relationship with myself. That storm, you know, it brings about medicine that will help us heal. Don't fight the battle, don't push back against. Let it wash over you! Learn to let it. Share your thoughts," *Nookomis* said in this third round of the talking circle, "cause to share is to connect and heal. Share with *Kitchi-Manitou*, make your struggles visible like that thunderstorm, cause when we do, we heal, and maybe, just maybe, we'll help heal others too."

With this license to share, Bill once again was the first to speak. "I don't feel as lonely, as alone, or empty anymore. I know that when that depressed feeling comes on, I know that I can go somewhere." He paused for a moment. "I can do something about it to make myself feel better. One of the things I do, and I know many of you do too, is I do speaking about HIV. We drive all over the place. I've worked the food bank, I've worked the drop-in centre, I'm the vice-president of an 'AIDS service organization'—I just keep really busy, to keep my mind off things. Whenever I find myself sitting at home, or being alone, which is pretty common, I start falling into the really extremely depressed state, and then I have to get busy and that's about the only way I deal with it right now."

Jared agreed with Bill. "Yeah, coming back to that 'AIDS service organization' and connecting with people, and the other clients and stuff here, helped a lot, too. It really did. Maybe a big difference, because sometimes you feel so focused on your own self that you forget there's other people around you that have problems too. So yeah, I see a psychiatrist too," Jared added, "and she's the one who told me or helped me realize that I needed to identify myself with other Indian people and learn to become more Traditional. So, that's why I'm here."

"Yeah, I like that Traditional stuff too," Bill responded. "When I got to the lodge and I sat down in this healing circle … and we have sage, and cedar, and sweetgrass, and tobacco and this is what they mean and this is why we put them in the direction that they are," he paused, "I feel more at ease, relaxed … it's focused more on the Aboriginal. Us!"

Rob added a layer of complexity with what he shared next. "I asked this 'other counsellor', 'Do you think it would be alright if I came out and told everybody else that I was gay? HIV?' The 'other counsellor' said the Elders were not quite ready for that. So, I couldn't tell anybody. So, I know that there's still that stigma when it comes to being gay, HIV, especially in the Aboriginal community."

Finally, it was my turn to speak, "You know, you think that you're depressed because you're sick and you can't move and you're in a compromising position and then all of a sudden … it's just humour. I don't know. I have a natural ability to make myself laugh at the worst times possible." Talking about humour like this, made me smile. It reminded me that the Creator has a

sense of humour too. “Perhaps,” I thought to myself, “humour provides a lesson to learn a life lesson.”

*Nookomis*, smiling and taking her time to look each of us in the eye, said, “You know, although we’re finished for today, I do want to leave you to think about one last thing. The story of *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu*, well, that’s a story that never ends. Our sacred stories—this *aadizookann*—it isn’t simply myth, … don’t you know? Those stories are meant to offer meaning and value to our lives. Just like the snake who was broken into a million pieces, *Mishebeshu* will manage to regenerate himself and *Animikii* will always come back to do battle with him. When the water churns because of *Mishebeshu*, I want you to remember how we began today. We each offered the waters, the land, our Elders, a bit of traditional tobacco. I want you to remember, moving forward, that *Animikii* almost always responds to a tobacco offering. If you find yourself in a storm on a lake—and I’m speaking metaphorically—I want you to be confident that the Thunderer will answer your prayers. Because much of what caused our feelings of sadness are social—like colonialism, poverty, racism, housing, unemployment—it’s important to understand that *Mishebeshu*, well, he’s unpredictable. He’ll take your tobacco but may not be appeased by it. The battles these colonial forces inflict on our lives, for many of us, will continue. It’s like the story of *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu*—it’s a story that never really ends. It’s like the story of colonialism that hasn’t ever really ended—and until those outsiders learn to ride *Mishebeshu* and encounter *Animikii*—these storms will likely continue. But hearing about *Animikii* and *Mishebeshu*—well, it plants a different story that will grow. “That story is in us now, plain and simple, it’s part of us,” Nookomis smiled and I was reminded once again of the wisdom and the medicine of my own grandmother. “But you know something even more important? Even though there are many Indigenous people who believe that *Nana’b’oozo* has retired—he’s hasn’t died, you know? —he’s simply sleeping. He waits for us to evoke his presence, when we convince him to carry our prayers to *Kitchi-Manitou*, have no doubt that support and help will come in your battles.”

## AFTERWORD

Thomas King as part of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Massey Hall Lecture Series wrote, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003: 2). This is made problematic by researchers who write stories about Indigenous peoples. With their powerful voices, it’s often likely that only one kind of story will tend to dominate. It’s a story about how Indigenous peoples live chaotic lives as a result of the legacy of residential schools, of alcohol and drug use, and of living lives built on shaky ground through experiences of poverty and homelessness, etc. Taken together, this one way of telling a story is often focused only on collective pathology and unhealthy livestyles. Indigenous scholars have warned that this single-sided story will often be used to justify continued paternalism and colonialism (Peltier et al., 2013).

The danger of this single story, as Adichie (2009) cautioned, is that it only presents one truth and only one way of looking at a people. It obscures other equally important facets of lived experience. A *Thunder’s Wisdom,* while it speaks to the hurts experienced as a result of colonization, was meant to tell a fuller, a richer, and a more nuanced kind of story. In ways

typical researchers' stories might fail, I wanted to make visible through story, the beauty of Indigenous cultural knowledge. I wanted to create a space where we as cultural peoples also experience and respond to colonial harms. You might say after experiencing the reading this story, that the power of storytelling is similar to what Okri (1997: 46) wrote: "If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives." It's a call that also perhaps responds to Basil Johnston's provocation: "do you want to hear our side of that story" (Johnston B. , 2007)? A *Thunder's Wisdom* draws on the power of our spiritual histories, and in using the allegory of Thunderers and Serpents, the product perhaps offers some recognition that Indigenous knowledges matter—that we as Indigenous peoples matter! In the crucible of everyday typical, cultural Indigenous life, stories are thought to possess incredible power. Stories such as this one, can "stretch back in time" (Borrows, 2010: p. ix) to places where the "old voices echo" within us (McLeod, 2007: p. 11). Quite simply, this re-story allow us to return to ourselves (Simpson, 2011). The power of Indigenous storytelling, as Simpson wrote, is that the stories allow us to "experience […] spaces of freedom and justice [where we can …] escape the gaze and the cage of the Empire, even if it is just a few minutes" (2011: p. 34).

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