maskosis:
The Healing Journey of Little Bear

A Narrative Analysis of the

Life of an Aboriginal Man with Quadriplegia

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ABSTRACT

A narrative analysis was used to explore the question, "What does it mean to be an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia?" Six in-depth semi-structured interviews and follow-up reviews were conducted with Dennis Sapp, a 52-year old Plains Cree man with quadriplegia who requested that his full name be used in the thesis document.

The results of the study appear in the form of a life story written in the first person derived through a process of narrative analysis of the interview transcripts. The narrative details Dennis' early beginnings on the Little Pine Reserve near North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada and his memories of his maternal grandfather, Cree elder and WWII Veteran, Tom Sapp, who raised Dennis in the traditional way until he was forced to go to the St. Anthony's Residential School at Onion Lake at six years of age. The narrative includes an account of Dennis' life before being taken to residential school, his experiences at residential school, and his life after leaving the school. In the narrative Dennis recounts the experience of losing his traditional culture and spirituality at residential school and the difficulties he encountered in his life as a result of the trauma of the residential school experience. He gives an account of sustaining a spinal cord injury and his experience post-injury and in rehabilitation. After reconnecting with his grandfather and returning to school to complete his education, Dennis rediscovered his traditional culture and spirituality and gained a renewed sense of meaning and purpose as a counsellor, disabilities advocate, and storyteller. Through regaining his culture and spirituality and sharing his story Dennis found balance and healing.

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kinanâskomitinâwâw kahkiyaw kâ-pê-wîcihiyêk

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my daughter, Jasmine,
whose story is just beginning…

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> ***If you want to know about my life as an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia, I think I would start right from the beginning, and right up to where I am now, because I think it will make sense, my being a quad*** (from the interview transcripts).

Introduction to the Study

My desire to carry out research on the life of a person with a disability came out of a series of personal conversations with an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia. I remember the first time I met him. We did not get off to a very good start. It was a bright spring day right before I started graduate school. I had taken a summer job as a casual care aide at this man's care home, working mostly night shifts and weekends. I was sitting at the dining room table chatting with a few of the residents over coffee. The man whose life was to become the subject of my thesis research, mentioned that his first language was Cree and that he was a fluent speaker. My undergraduate degree was in languages and linguistics and I have a passion for languages, so I was curious to hear the sound of the Cree language. I asked him how to say various words in his language. The Cree word for woman, *iskwêw* sounded like "squaw;" when he repeated this word forcefully several times, I tried to tease him about calling me, "Woman," which when spoken with that tone in English, has a negative, domineering connotation. However, I could not remember the whole Cree word, so I repeated back the only part I could remember, "squaw." Although I had no intention of using that word in a derogatory manner, he became quite angry, and announced that he did not wish to discuss his language or culture with someone who did not respect them. This

came as a total shock to me, since the entire interaction had arisen out of my sincere desire to learn more about his language and culture. I told him I was sorry, and that I had meant no disrespect by my comment. There was a long, uncomfortable silence and then another resident politely changed the subject.

The next time I worked in that resident's house, I brought him a jar of wild salmon and a smooth, black stone. I did not try to justify my interpretation of the linguistic mishap of the previous week. I simply wanted to make a gesture of peace, which he accepted, somewhat bemused. After that, we would chat as I helped him with his morning and evening routines, and we began to develop a friendly rapport. I arranged to stay after work on a couple of occasions to visit with him and learn more about his culture. I brought him tobacco and he shared his life and culture with me. After our initial misunderstanding, I might have avoided this resident or acted defensively to justify what I had said and, in so doing, missed out on what has turned out to be a valuable journey of cross-cultural dialogue and research. I am glad that I was able to swallow my pride, listen, and move through misunderstanding to trust, mutual respect, and reciprocity. While this research focuses on the experience of being an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia, there is another story, a research story, written between the lines. This study has two titles: *maskosis,* which means "Little Bear", is the title the participant chose for his life story, and *wîcihitowin* is the title the participant suggested referring to our shared research journey. The word *wîcihitowin* has multiple meanings: partnership, mutual respect, and helping one another. I am grateful to Dennis Sapp for remaining open to me and accompanying me on this research journey.

The catalyst for this research was something that Dennis said during one of our conversations. He told me that, in many ways, his life was actually *better* since the injury that left him with quadriplegia. He said that being in a wheelchair had forced him to slow down and listen to what was happening on the inside. He stated, "I can't keep running away anymore" (D. Sapp, personal communication, Summer 2001). This research evolved from my desire to know more about how Dennis Sapp came to an understanding of his life as "better" after a life-altering disability, and from my desire to hear more of his stories and to share them with a wider audience. I have presented his life story in the hope that it will be of value to persons who have experienced a life-altering disability and to those who work with them, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

A narrative methodology was utilized for this study. In-depth semi-structured interviews carried out with the participant were used to generate data that is presented as a first-person narrative. Chapter One is an introduction to the study including the purpose of the study, the research question, and the rationale for the study, followed by the literature review in Chapter Two, and the methodology in Chapter Three. Chapter Four is a narrative derived through narrative analysis of the interview transcripts, and Chapter Five presents a discussion of the results, context of the inquiry, suggestions for further research, and reflections on the contribution of the study to counselling practice.

As a point of clarification, the word "Aboriginal" is used throughout this study according to the Statistics Canada (2006) definition of Aboriginal identity as any person who identifies with or belongs to a political or cultural group related to the

original inhabitants of North America, including the Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada.

Purpose of the Study

Persons with disabilities are accustomed to being examined. Their physical functioning is measured and evaluated. Plans are derived to "fix" them as much as possible, with the aim of improving their functioning. Persons with disabilities often trade privacy for much-needed personal care. They are often understood in terms of the level of care they require, the accommodations that must be made to facilitate their functioning in the world, and their "special needs."

Persons who do not have disabilities often relate to those who do as broken, vulnerable and innocent. According to disability rights activist and writer Marta Russell (1998), "the social tendency is to negatively link impairment with 'uselessness' and to view disability as a personal tragedy, a matter for medicine to 'correct' "(p.14).

Studies that aim to operationalize, investigate, measure and evaluate specific aspects of the needs of persons with disabilities, while useful in the realm of policy and health promotion, end up fragmenting and decontextualizing full, complex lives in the name of objectivity and standardized methodology. The individual voices of the very people one is trying to help are often lost in the analysis. Their unique stories are silenced by statistics. Storytelling is a powerful act. By telling their stories, wounded people participate in shifting the notion of the injured individual from passive victim and object of care, to autonomous agent and subject (Frank, 1995). Kleinman (1988) was one of the first voices in behavioural science to describe the

inadequacy of statistically-based research when trying to better understand disability and illness:

> Symptom scales and survey questionnaires and behavioural checklists quantify functional impairment and disability, rendering quality of life fungible. Yet about suffering they are silent. The thinned-out image of patients and families that perforce must emerge from such research is scientifically replicable but ontologically invalid; it has statistical, not epistemological, significance; it is a dangerous distortion (p. 28).

Kleinman (1988) argued that history, biography, psychotherapy, and ethnography were more suitable research methods, and that empathic listening could facilitate the building of what he termed an "illness narrative…that will make sense of and give value to… the experience of chronic illness or disability" (p. 54). Ironically, the statistical research on coping and adjustment after disability identifies "meaningfulness" as the most important variable predicting successful adjustment.

The importance of meaning-making after acquired disability is well-evidenced in the research literature on coping and adjustment. There have been many experimental studies of successful adjustment and coping with an acquired disability (e.g., Elliot & Sherwin, 1997; Livneh & Antonak, 1997; Snyder, 1998). Antonovsky's (1987) theory of *salutogenesis* has been applied in research investigating adjustment and coping with disability (Antonovsky, 1993; Korotkov, 1998; Lustig & Rosenthal, 2000; Rena, Moshe, & Abraham, 1996). Antonovsky theorized that a person's *generalized resistance resources* determine how an individual will cope with stressors. He further theorized that individuals who possess these *generalized resistance resources* also may develop a *sense of coherence* about their life experience. According to Antonovsky, the most important element of successful coping is *meaningfulness*, wherein stressors are perceived as challenges one must

commit to transforming and overcoming. How one makes sense of one's situation is an important determinant of adjustment and successful coping. Despite a multitude of experimental studies carried out to analyze the factors involved in successful adjustment and coping with an acquired disability, I identified a need for more research from a narrative perspective on the ways that persons with disabilities successfully reconstruct their lives after an acquired disability.

Recovery from a disabling injury is a journey of healing of the whole person (DeSanto-Madeya, 2006) that compels the injured person to not only heal physically, but also to reconstruct their life while addressing questions of life purpose (Howlett, 1999; Kilmont-Booth, 2001). The purpose of this research was to present the life story of an Aboriginal man with a quadriplegia, by allowing him to speak about the events that led up to his life-altering injury, how he has found purpose, and how he has made sense of his changed life. I was interested in Dennis' unique way of making meaning from the difficult events of his life, and I was curious about the possible influences and insights that have contributed to his understanding of his life's meaning and purpose.

Rationale for the Study

According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) (1996), Aboriginal rates of genetic disability do not differ significantly from the general Canadian population, but rates of disability due to trauma and environmental effects are much higher for Aboriginal Canadians: "The disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal rates of disability corresponds to disparities in rates of injury, accident, violence, self-destructive or suicidal behaviour and illness (such as diabetes)

that can result in permanent impairment" (RCAP, 1996, p.148). The Aboriginal Reference Group on Disability Issues reported that Aboriginal youth 15-24 years of age have a disability rate of 21.7% compared with 7% for non-Aboriginal youth (Human Resources Development Canada, 1998). Fey (2001) described the need for more research in the face of this disparity:

> Research in the area of Aboriginal people with disabilities is very important because the needs of Canadian people in this area are significantly greater than the norm, response to those needs appears to be limited, and academic research to draw attention to and understand the area is relatively non-existent (p. 30).

This study contributes to a small but developing body of research that documents the personal narratives of Aboriginal persons with disabilities. The aim of the present study was to understand more deeply the lived experience of one Aboriginal man with quadriplegia, by presenting a detailed narrative of one life lived at the intersection of culture and disability.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The following review of literature includes a discussion of issues related to defining disability, a description of disability in Canada, and specific information related to Aboriginal persons and disability. I proceed to a discussion of some important ways people cope with and adjust to an acquired disability. Further research is woven into the discussion section in Chapter Five, as once the interviews were concluded and the narrative analysis was complete, I undertook a search for additional literature relevant to the results.

Disability

Defining Disability

According to information on the website of the Arch Legal Resource Centre (2003) for Persons with Disabilities, there are many methods of conceptualizing "disability," although disability is typically understood as a functional limitation. Typically, disabilities have been viewed as medical issues, health problems, or some physical or mental abnormality to be cured. The Human Resources Development Canada (2003) discussion paper entitled *Defining Disability*, stated that it can be difficult to define disability, because it is a multidimensional concept that includes both objective and subjective characteristics. The report also outlined challenges to traditional definitions of disability that focus solely on impairment and functional limitations. The report described the criticisms that were levied by disability rights activists in the 1970's of notions of disability that ignore the social and physical

environment in which persons with disabilities live. Within this ecological model, disability is seen as resulting from the interaction of impairment, activity limitation, and participation restrictions in a *specific* social or physical environment such as work, home, or school. Similar social models of disability present disability as a social construct created by ability-oriented and ability-dominated environments. While social models of disability acknowledge the reality of an objective physical or mental impairment, they emphasize the disabling effects of society's failure to adjust social and physical environments to allow for the full participation of individuals with disabilities. In its ruling in the Mercier case, the Supreme Court of Canada (2000) acknowledged the social or contextual model of disability. In *Mercier*, the Supreme Court established a precedent for a broad and flexible definition of disability which would include those who did not fit the traditional definitions and thus lacked protection from discrimination on the grounds of disability. The Mercier case included persons with chronic health conditions such as Crohn's disease, which may be aggravated by stress, and in which the severity of symptoms varies widely from person to person. One complainant in the case had an asymptomatic spinal cord condition which was believed might incapacitate him in the future and had led to discrimination in the workplace. In her ruling, Justice L'Heureux-Dube stated,

> [b]y placing the emphasis on human dignity, respect and the right to equality rather than a simple biomedical condition, this approach recognizes that the attitudes of society and its members often contribute to the idea or perception of a 'handicap.' In fact, a person may have no limitations in everyday activities other than those created by prejudice and stereotypes…thus, a 'handicap' may be the result of a physical limitation, an ailment, a social construct, a perceived limitation or a combination of these factors (paras. 77 & 79).

After this important decision there was greater acknowledgement of the disabling nature of certain environments and the need to remove obstacles to full participation for all persons.

Disability in Canada

The 2001 *Participation and Activity Limitation Survey* (Statistics Canada, 2002) identified 3.6 million Canadians with disabilities, or one out of every eight citizens. Persons with spinal cord injuries accounted for about 30,000, almost 1% of these disabled Canadians. The *Workforce Participation Survey of Canadians with Spinal Cord Injuries* (*WPSCSCI*) was published by the Canadian Paraplegic Association in 1996, representing the first major analysis of Canadians with spinal cord injury. The report stated that, whereas most disability rates in Canada mirror the male/female ratios in the general population, 81% of their survey participants were male and only 19% were female. Although rates vary from province to province, four times as many men as women sustain spinal cord injuries. Spinal cord injury occurs most often to male youth. Fifty percent of participants in the study were injured when they were between 15 and 24 years of age, and 80% were injured between the ages of 15 and 34. Severity of impairment was determined by the level at which the spinal cord injury occurred and the degree of injury to that location on the spinal cord. Quadriplegia generally results from injuries to the upper cervical region (the neck), whereas paraplegia most often results from injuries to the thoracic and lumbar regions (mid and low back). However, in some cases, an incomplete break at the upper neck may leave someone more mobile than a complete break at the mid back. Most people with spinal cord injuries were using a manual wheelchair (68% of survey

respondents), although a number used motorized wheelchairs (23% of survey respondents). The survey noted that 27% of the participants lived in rural areas at the time of their injury, but that the vast majority had relocated to urban centres due to improved access to care, training opportunities, and employment that was less dependent on physical ability. Only 3.3% of the survey participants identified themselves as Aboriginal and those who did reported significantly lower levels of education and employment. Information gathered by the Canadian Paraplegic Association (2000) indicated that 54% of their members' injuries were the result of motor vehicle accidents (car and motorcycle), 17.7% were caused by falls and industrial accidents, and the remainder were due to other causes, including medical conditions, diving, and sports-related injuries.

Aboriginal Persons and Disability

Incidence rates for Aboriginal Canadians with disabilities were reported in the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS, Statistics Canada, 1994a). According to the APS, 31.4% of Aboriginal Canadians reported having a disability. The definition of disability used in this survey followed directly from the 1980 World Health Organization International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICFDH) definition: "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (Human Resources Development Canada, 2003, p. 9). According to the National Aboriginal Network on Disability (1994), Aboriginal disability rates are "2.3 times the national average" (p. 33). Of all Aboriginal Canadians with disabilities, 66% were considered to have mild disabilities, 22% had moderate disabilities, and

12% had severe disabilities. Severity of disability was determined by adding the scores from a 23-item screening questionnaire of functional abilities. One point was given for partial loss of function, and two points for total loss of function. These questions rated self-perceived limitations in activities such as dressing, standing, using fingers, reaching in any direction, and cutting food (Ng, 1996b). Severity of disability was classified according to the following categories: No disability (0); Slight disability (1-4); Moderate disability (5-10); Severe disability (11+) (Ng, 1996a).

According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) (1996), Aboriginal rates of genetic disability do not differ significantly from the general Canadian population, but rates of disability due to trauma and environmental effects are much higher for Aboriginal Canadians: "The disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal rates of disability corresponds to disparities in rates of injury, accident, violence, self-destructive or suicidal behaviour, and illness (such as diabetes) that can result in permanent impairment" (RCAP, 1996, p.148). The Aboriginal Reference Group on Disability Issues reported that Aboriginal youth 15-24 years of age have a disability rate of 21.7% compared with 7% for non-Aboriginal youth (Human Resources Development Canada, 1998). Fey (2001) described the need for more research in the face of this disparity:

> Research in the area of Aboriginal people with disabilities is very important because the needs of Canadian people in this area are significantly greater than the norm, response to those needs appears to be limited, and academic research to draw attention to and understand the area is relatively non-existent (p. 30).

Approximately 43% of Aboriginal people live on remote reserves where there may be little access to healthcare and rehabilitation services. A 2001 study out of the University of Regina entitled, *Urban Aboriginal Persons with Disabilities: Triple Jeopardy!* (Durst & Bluenchardt, 2001), reported that most Aboriginal people with disabilities have to leave their reserves to access social services and healthcare. For most, any hopes of ever moving back to the reserve quickly fade due to the reality of inaccessible buildings, lack of transportation, and the absence of trained caregivers and healthcare personnel. Therefore, in order to gain access to necessary supports, Aboriginal Canadians must usually leave their homes, families, and traditional culture. The report described the marginalization, isolation, and loneliness many Aboriginal Canadians face in urban environments. One of the major issues identified by the authors of the study related to the frustration experienced by Aboriginal persons seeking access to resources. The authors of the study used the term "ping-pong effect" to describe the jurisdictional barriers Aboriginal persons with disabilities face in accessing needed supports and services. Aboriginal people with disabilities must deal with a healthcare bureaucracy that has them going in circles in an attempt to access services and funding, with provincial authorities citing education and healthcare as federal responsibilities, leaving off-reserve individuals tangled in jurisdictional red tape :

> As per the Indian Act, the Federal government is financially responsible for the Aboriginal population of Canada. However, when an Aboriginal person leaves the reserve, the funding arrangement changes. The federal government is responsible for education and medical care, but education is delivered to provincial standards, which may differ from the education delivered on the reserve. Individual bands do not feel responsible for Indian people leaving the reserve and the federal government expects the province to pay. Frequently, provincial programs deny [services] to First Nations people, claiming they are

> a federal responsibility. As a result, the individual suffers (Durst & Bluenchardt, 2001, p. 98).

Summary

In summary, definitions of disability have come to include the concept that disability is a social construct and that, while functional limitations may exist for an individual, it is the disabling nature of certain environments that prevents full participation for all persons. There is a large discrepancy in rates of spinal cord injury for males and females. Almost 80% of persons with spinal cord injuries are male, with the vast majority of persons being injured between 15-34 years of age. While genetic disability rates are similar for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, Aboriginal persons have higher rates of disability due to trauma, illness, suicidal behaviour, and violence. The Aboriginal rate of disability is more than double the national average and the Aboriginal rate of adolescent disability is over triple. There are many barriers facing Aboriginal persons with disabilities. The lack of accessibility and services on many reserves force most persons with disabilities to relocate to urban environments. Many Aboriginal persons with disabilities face jurisdictional barriers when they try to access services or funding.

Coping and Adjustment

Developing a Sense of Coherence

While much of the research on disability continues to emerge from the disease model, there has been a movement within the field to explore the successful coping of persons with physical challenges. Antonovsky (1987) created a model of successful coping called *salutogenesis*. His model postulated that humans, like any system,

experience various degrees of disequilibrium to which they must adapt. Stressors exert tension on the system, which may be experienced in a positive, neutral, or negative way. Antonovsky suggested that an individual's *generalized resistance resources* determine how they respond to stressors. These resources include money, shelter and food, intelligence and knowledge, rituals and religion, or social support. He also theorized that persons with these resources might develop what he termed a *sense of coherence,* comprised of *comprehensibility*, *manageability*, and *meaningfulness*.

Comprehensibility refers to a person's perception of the orderliness and predictability of their world. *Manageability* refers to one's trust that one possesses adequate personal and social resources to deal with challenges as they arise. *Meaningfulness* is the degree to which stressors are perceived as challenges one must commit to transforming and overcoming. Antonovsky theorized that *meaningfulness*, the emotional component of the *sense of coherence,* is the most important of the three in determining successful coping, because it provides the person with the motivation to mobilize their resources to overcome a serious challenge effectively. Antonovsky (1987) developed a 29-item scale to measure the *sense of coherence* drawing on a wide variety of sources to review its psychometric properties (Antonovsky, 1993). Criterion and known-group validity data supported the theoretical construct of the *sense of coherence* (Mlonzi & Struempfer, 1998).

Various researchers have set out to operationalize and study the *sense of coherence* of individuals with health challenges. *Sense of coherence* has been positively related to subjective reports of life satisfaction, quality of life, self-concept,

internal locus of control, and attitudes towards personal health (Antonovsky, 1993; Korotkov, 1998). Individuals with a high *sense of coherence* were found to be less anxious, less dependent, had better health, and were more accepting of their disability (Rena, Moshe, & Abraham, 1996). In Livneh and Antonak's (1997) model of psychosocial adjustment, successful adjustment to disability was defined as "life satisfaction." This last phase of adjustment is exemplified by individuals who have regained self-esteem, are working to meet their potential, and are actively engaging in social relationships, employment, and educational endeavours. They are well-adjusted and experience a high level of life satisfaction. Lustig and Rosenthal's (2000) study investigated the relationship of adjustment (defined as "life satisfaction") to Antonovsky's sense of coherence construct. Lustig and Rosenthal's study of adjustment after serious injury and disability defined life satisfaction as, "self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth" (p. 3). Life satisfaction ratings were used as indicators of successful adjustment for persons with disabilities. A high degree of correlation was found between positive adjustment and each of the components of Antonovsky's *sense of coherence,* with the *meaningfulness* variable demonstrating the greatest power. Results demonstrated a positive correlation between the sense of coherence and adjustment ($r=0.87$, $p< .01$). The meaningfulness subscale accounted for 70% of the variance in adjustment. They suggested that counsellors and those in the rehabilitation field could use Antonovsky's model of *salutogenesis* to positively conceptualize their work with clients rather than relating to their clients from a pathologizing stance. They also suggested specific ways in which the work of

rehabilitation counsellors might more consciously assess for and bolster the *generalized resistance resources* of their clients. For example, using constructivist cognitive therapy, counsellors might help clients to reconstruct and reframe their life experiences and assist them in constructing more meaningful, supportive, and adaptive outcomes.

Cognitive Reframing

Two examples of cognitive reframing that have been correlated with better adjustment to serious injury are self-blame and benefit-finding (Higgins & Liebowitz, 1999). Higgins and Liebowitz explained that when sudden tragedy occurs, it is common to look for some causal explanation as a way to gain control. Although it may seem to be a negative belief, blaming oneself for one's adversity has been demonstrated to have a positive influence on adjustment. In a study of 29 persons with trauma-based spinal cord injuries, Bulman and Wortman (1977) compared the participants' coping as determined by a 16-point scale rated by a nurse and a social work familiar with the patient, with their level of self-blame determined through an in-depth interview. They determined that persons with spinal cord injuries who blamed themselves for their accidents were actually better adjusted, although this effect is more pronounced in the early stages of recovery (Schulz & Decker, 1985). Higgins and Snyder (1997) suggested that this self-blame actually functions to give the person who has been injured some sense of control and assurance that there is order and coherence in the world.

In addition to self-blame, another cognitive re-frame evident in persons who have adjusted well to a major stressor is to find some positive gain in the negative

event. In their discussion of the social construction of adaptive outcomes, Higgins and Leibovitz (1999) defined this as "benefit-finding." They described a study by Schulz and Decker (1985), in which 64% of the disabled participants (N= 100) who had been living with a spinal cord injury for an average of 20 years, agreed that their "disability had brought purpose and meaning to their lives" (p. 35). Benefits reported by Higgins and Leibovitz in their review of the social construction of adaptive outcomes include "realizing what is most important in life, improved relationships with loved ones, renewed spirituality, and new opportunities for self-exploration" (p. 35). According to Higgins and Leibovitz, both self-blame and benefit-finding re-frames serve a wider social purpose: "the finding of meaning, spiritual enlightenment, or renewed purpose through suffering not only meets the emotional needs of the afflicted individual, but also services a powerful social and cultural imperative" (p. 36). We feel safer and more secure knowing that the world is a predictable and meaningful place, and that tragedy is not a senseless occurrence, but rather it occurs for a reason and there is something or someone to blame for it. Somewhere within the struggle to adapt and regain homeostasis, it seems to be necessary for injured persons to both assimilate the tragedy into their self-understanding, as well as to make the appropriate accommodations in order to function in their new reality.

Meaning Reconstruction after Loss

Constructivist psychologist Robert Neimeyer has written extensively on the notion of meaning reconstruction after traumatic loss. According to Neimeyer (2000), in order to successfully cope, a person who has experienced a major loss such as disability must "relearn the world" and this often leads a person to make significant

revisions to their assumptive world (Neimeyer, 2000). These assumptions are deeply-held beliefs which function as foundational schemas about ourselves and the world. For example, we might hold a belief that the world is a safe place or that we will be taken care of (Neimeyer & Stewart, 1996).

According to Neimeyer (2000), "by incorporating the reality of [a] trauma into our revised assumptive world and assigning it a personal meaning, we may be transformed by tragedy, and made "sadder but wiser" by the experience (p. 44). A traumatic loss requires a process of meaning reconstruction which occurs through the construction of a personal narrative, with the teller positioned uniquely "in relation to broader discourses of culture, gender, and spirituality" (p. 111):

> Innovating upon culturally-available systems of belief, individuals construct permeable, provisional meaning structures that help them interpret experiences, coordinate their relationships with others, and organize their actions towards personally significant goals. Importantly, however, these frameworks of meaning are anchored less in some "objective" reality, than in specific negotiations with intimate others and general systems of cultural discourse (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 110).

When the plot of a life story is interrupted by loss, it is necessary to re-establish the plot structure, "by telling and retelling our story in the context of listeners who care, each of whom contributes, in a unique way, to the further evolution of the narrative," and in so doing, to "grope toward a new sense of coherence" (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 54).

Hope

Hope plays an important role in coping and adjustment after a disability. According to Snyder (1998), hope sustains a positive view of oneself and one's future after a severe, life-altering trauma. He used the terms *agency* and *pathways* to describe the main elements of hope: *agency* refers to the strength of purpose to

persevere towards one's goals, despite serious injury; *pathways* refers to the person's belief that they can find ways to meet those goals. Hope is something people learn very early in life. It may be modelled by the important adults in a child's life, especially within the family (Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997). According to Elliot and Sherwin (1997), religious and cultural messages of hope give members a sense of purpose, meaning, and belonging. High-hope people are more apt to reorient themselves and their goals after an injury, and to persevere in attaining their goals (Elliot & Kurylo, 2000).

Summary

There are various conceptual frameworks for understanding coping and adjustment after a disabling injury. The concept of the sense of coherence is comprised of manageability, comprehensibility, and meaningfulness, with the meaningfulness variable showing the greatest effect. Cognitive re-framing is an important aspect of successful adjustment, including benefit-finding and self-blame. Meaning reconstruction after loss and disability includes a revision in the client's assumptive world and the construction of a coherent narrative to bring a sense of purpose and meaning to the loss. Hope is an important concept in adjustment and coping with acquired disability, and religious and cultural messages of hope give people a sense of purpose, meaning, and belonging.

Research Question

The research question guiding this inquiry can be summarized as, "What does it mean to be an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia?" I was curious about the influences and insights that have contributed to one individual's understanding of his

life, including its meaning and purpose. I wanted to understand more deeply the lived experience of one Aboriginal man with quadriplegia by presenting a detailed narrative of one life lived at the intersection of culture and disability. This study contributes to a small but developing body of research that documents the lived experience of persons with disabilities in a way that honours each participant's unique, socially-constructed self-in-context.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

We cannot generalize from our uniquely individual experiences, yet we can spin threads of understanding and empathy between us. (Siegel, 1990, p. 328)

Introduction

The following discussion includes an overview of qualitative research from a constructivist and a narrative approach, as well as a description of the research strategies employed in the study. The research strategies section includes specific information on participant selection, data generation, analysis and representation, and a discussion of methods used to establish trustworthiness and rigour throughout the research endeavour. I include information on my own values and interests related to the research topic, and a discussion of some important ethical considerations, particularly specific ethical guidelines I referred to in carrying out respectful research with an Aboriginal person. This was important given that Aboriginal scholars have begun to identify the ways in which European research has been connected to a long history of colonialism and imperialism, and recommended certain ethical guidelines, protocols, and processes for conducting respectful research with Aboriginal persons (e.g., Baydala, Placsko, Hampton, Bourassa, McKay-Nabb, 2006; Ermine, 2001; Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004; O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004; Schnarch, 2004; Smith, 1999). The methodology section ends with a section underlining the appropriateness of narrative analysis for a study investigating the life of an Aboriginal person, and the role such a research method can play in honouring and strengthening the Aboriginal oral tradition. This section reviews the importance of storytelling in relation to Aboriginal ways of being and Aboriginal ways of

knowing, including the use of storytelling as a method of analysis and a means of sharing diverse forms of knowledge.

Qualitative Inquiry

This study is rooted in a qualitative approach to inquiry. A fundamental assumption of this approach is that there is not just one fixed reality that we can know, but rather there are "multiple intangible realities which can be studied only holistically" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p.237). In a qualitative study, the researcher and the researched interact and influence one another. There is no assumption of pure neutrality or lack of bias. Subjectivity and reflexivity are hallmarks of the research process. By subjectivity, I mean that we "locate ourselves and our research practices on the same critical plane as the object of study" (Roseneil, 1993, p. 181). By reflexivity, I mean the writing of self into and the locating of self within, the research process (Harding, 1987; Roseneil, 1993).

The goal of qualitative inquiry is to develop an ideographic body of knowledge wherein individual differences are as important as similarities (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Generalization and prediction are not considered possible, nor are they desirable within this research paradigm. According to Guba and Lincoln (1982), "phenomena are neither time- nor context-free" (p. 238). In qualitative approaches the researcher recognizes that the persons and actions being studied are shaped by a "multiplicity of factors" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 238). A richer knowing results from an understanding of the interrelated web of events, processes, experiences, and meanings of the subjects themselves (Peterson, 1993). In qualitative research, there is explicit acknowledgement that "inquiry is always value-bound" (Guba & Lincoln,

1982, p. 238). Both researcher and participant bring biases and values to the research, and it is important to acknowledge positionality in the research endeavour. According to Mies (1992), "The postulate of *value-free research*...has to be replaced by *conscious partiality*, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects" (p. 38).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated that "any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity [and that] there are no objective observations, only observations situated in the worlds of—and in between—the observer and the observed" (p. 19). According to Denzin and Lincoln, "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). Although there are several unique and distinct methods of qualitative research, the present study was carried out utilizing a narrative approach to research, analysis, and representation, and grounded in a constructivist perspective.

Constructivism and Narrative Research

Much of the study's language and terminology were derived from a constructivist understanding of social research. Constructivists, such as Mahoney (1996) understand the individual as an "active agent seeking order and meaning in social contexts where his or her uniquely personal experiences are challenged to continue developing" (p. 5). Goncalves (1997) identified four key assumptions of a postmodern constructivist understanding, which underscore the centrality of language, conversations, and narrative in knowing: a) an experiential epistemology, b) an anti-foundationalist hermeneutic that embraces a multiplicity of constructed

meanings, c) hermeneutics as narrative discourse, and d) narrative discourse as culture. In a constructivist approach, ontology and epistemology cannot be separated: a person's *being* and *knowing* are considered dynamic, creative, and interrelated. There are many ways of being and knowing, and the constellation of who we are and what we know includes the possibility of multiple meanings. We construct meaning through the use of language, therefore our knowing and being are narrative. In other words, we are situated in a "narrative matrix" (Goncalves, 1997, p. xv). Our telling and knowing and being are all interdependent and continuously evolving. We live stories within stories among stories in constant flux. Our knowledge, being, and narratives are situated in particular cultural and temporal contexts as we construct and reconstruct ourselves.

One of the ways we make sense of our experience as individuals is by rendering it in narrative form (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Gee, 1985; Mischler, 1986; Reissman, 1993). Reissman (1993) believed that this was particularly the case for traumatic experience and difficult life changes. By preserving the long stretches of narrative form in interview transcripts, researchers can respect a participant's unique means of constructing meaning, instead of chopping up participants stories into themes and variables which are then analyzed with some objective truth claim being made in the representation of data, as is the case of research predicated on what Bruner (1986) referred to as *paradigmatic reasoning.* The method that was best suited to the present study derives from what Bruner defined as *narrative reasoning*. I was not seeking to tease out themes and truths for all persons experiencing disability,

but rather to understand how one individual would sequence and find meaning in the interconnected events of his life.

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), narrative research is the study of:

> …stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle…trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question (p. 744).

Through narrative, we make sense of our experiences and can experience that *sense of coherence* described by Antonovsky. The present study was well-suited to a narrative approach as what was sought was an understanding of the participant related to his experience of sustaining a life-altering disability. By utilizing a narrative approach, I gave Dennis the opportunity to speak in his own words about his life in all its complexity and allowed him to make sense of the events of his life in all their interrelatedness. Although my choice of research topic was influenced by my own interests in emancipatory and anti-oppressive research, I make no bold claims to have championed any injustice through the present research, or to have given voice to the participant. According to Reissman (1993), "we cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret" (p. 8), and we can "bear witness" to another's experience (p. 4). These words are a caution against the notion that we as researchers have direct access to another's experience and can thus, "give voice" to a silenced group.

Research Strategies

> *Research is "a series of transformations involving telling, listening, transcribing, analyzing, and reading"* (Reissman, 1993, p. 6).

Participant Selection

The participant for the present study was originally recruited for a mini-study conducted for a graduate research seminar. Upon the recommendation of the course instructor, this research was later expanded and developed into a full thesis. When the decision was made to expand the work, I sent the participant a letter inviting him to contact me if he wished to discuss participation in the thesis research. As previously mentioned, the participant was a resident of a care home at which I was employed as a casual care aide. Originally I intended to only use data generated in the new interview sessions, but I later asked the participant if he would consent to the use of the original interview transcript generated for the mini-study, to which he agreed. There were parts of that interview that I felt served to enrich the writing of the narrative.

Data Generation

This research was carried out with an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia by conducting five telephone interviews of approximately one hour each plus additional phone discussion and elaboration as the transcribed interviews were reviewed. The choice to conduct the interviews by telephone was influenced by the fact that I had recently moved to northern British Columbia and was at home caring for my infant daughter. Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has described the importance in Maori research of what is termed *kanohi kitea* or, "the seen face" referring to how important it is for those carrying out research with Aboriginal persons to present themselves face to face, so I wondered how carrying out the interviews by telephone might influence my research relationship and the quality of the data. The participant reported that he was comfortable with telephone interviews due to his previous

contact with me and the fact that he could imagine my face and what I looked like as we spoke. It would seem that, in this instance, our pre-research relationship served to increase the participant's level of comfort and trust throughout the interview process. The participant was provided with the interview questions in advance of the interviews. The questions were of a very general, open-ended nature. Four interviews were originally scheduled and, at the end of the fourth interview, the participant requested a fifth interview because he said he wanted to speak more about certain topics, such as his experience of depression and about becoming a pipe carrier.

After the five interviews were transcribed verbatim, the printed transcripts were sent to the participant for review. The results of the transcript review process were also recorded on audiotape and transcribed and the participant was provided with a written copy for review. During transcript review sessions carried out by telephone, I read back each interview transcript to the participant and asked him to stop me when he wished to make any changes or additions. I also stopped repeatedly throughout the process to clarify meanings and points of fact in the initial interview and to elicit rich details and descriptions of some of the people, events, and locations described in the interviews, which I used to enhance the narrative. Throughout the transcript review process, I provided the participant with the opportunity to stop or to take short breaks. By using a semi-structured interview format, I allowed ample space for the participant to tell his story in his own way. I referred to a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B), so that the interviews remained in line with the purpose of the study.

According to Reissman (1993), finding narratives of an individual's life experience is not difficult. If a research participant is not constantly interrupted with a standardized research interview protocol, that individual will most often reply in story. Reissman wrote that "traditional approaches to qualitative analysis often fracture…texts in the service of interpretation and generalization by taking bits and pieces, snippets of a response edited out of context" (p. 3). These approaches remove the narrative structure and sequence and fragment the speaker's full meaning. By allowing the participant long stretches of narration, I was able to elicit extended narratives of his life story. According to Reissman (1993), "transcribing discourse… is an interpretive practice" (p. 13), and it is "incomplete, partial, and selective" (p. 11). I listened to the audio-tapes numerous times and immersed myself in the interview transcripts to allow the data to speak to me as well as to think with the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In preparing the transcripts of the research interviews, I had to make decisions regarding how I represented the spoken word with all its varied tones, nuances, phrasing, pauses, and emphases. For instance, there were a few places in the interview transcripts where I needed to be sure to include in brackets such information as, "he laughs" because the text reads as being much more serious without this information**.** In the Discussion section I have identified a need for further research into the challenges of representing an oral narrative as a written text, including a need for further exploration of the cultural and ethical considerations involved in presenting an Aboriginal oral account in a Western academic context.

Data Analysis and Representation

In keeping with Frechtling and Sharp's (1997) assertion that research is an iterative process, my analysis of the data occurred throughout the research process. According to Frechtling and Sharp, qualitative research is "fundamentally an iterative set of processes" (p. 2) because,

> … in qualitative evaluation, data collection and data analysis are not temporally discrete stages: as soon as the first pieces of data are collected, the evaluator begins to make sense of the information…part of what distinguishes qualitative analysis is a loop-like pattern of multiple rounds of revisiting the data as additional questions emerge, new connections are unearthed, and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding of the material (p. 2).

It became apparent to me through the research process that the iterative nature of qualitative research was also evidenced in the participant's collaboration as co-researcher. As the participant of this study engaged with the interview process and had the opportunity to reflect on the interview transcripts, he deepened his own self-reflection, made more connections, and returned with more stories. Although my research question pertained specifically to adjustment and meaning-making after a serious life-altering injury, my participant extended the purposes of research and began to deepen and transform the process from within, educating me and challenging me, as can best be done through the telling of a good story.

Writing may also be employed as a method of inquiry, and a method of discovery and analysis in qualitative research (Richardson, 2001). Richardson described writing as a way to find something out that we did not know before, not something we only attempt once our points are all organized and outlined. Writing is a dynamic, creative process and we do not need to silence our own voices for fear of contaminating the research (Richardson, 2001). In qualitative data analysis, ethics, relationship, emotions, and the researcher's subjectivity are themselves rich areas of

exploration, and not just footnotes to the "real research", so the thesis document includes reflections on ethics and process in the research endeavour.

The interview data were represented as a first person narrative to privilege the voice of the participant. The narrative is my best attempt at conveying the participant's meaning, in his voice, while condensing long passages of oral storytelling and conversation. It is a co-creation of the Aboriginal oral storyteller and the non-Aboriginal creative writer although, in present Western academic and legal frameworks, I hold sole copyright to the thesis, including the written expression of his story that appears in the Results section. The participant trusted me enough to share his story with me. It is his story. He lived it. He told it. With his permission, I composed a written representation of his story. According to Stevenson (1999), the Cree notion of copyright deals with the specific protocols required to be told or to pass on different kinds of knowledge and stories, and which stories cannot be made public. "Academics…need to respect the fact that Cree copyright laws and protocols exist and need to be adhered to if trust relations are going to be established" (Stevenson, 1999, p. 33). Stevenson noted that, "personal life histories and reminiscences are not bound by the same rules of transmission as the sacred and historical narratives [and are] more flexible" (p. 33). In the Western understanding of these matters, I hold sole copyright to the entire thesis document as author of the *written expression* of the participant's story. In the end, I decided not to refer to the research participant as co-author with shared copyright of the Results section, as I had considered doing. In the Cree understanding of these matters, the participant simply shared his story with me and I cannot "own" the content. As Stevenson (1999) wrote:

> [S]igned consent forms do not mean that researchers have copyright over the stories. It simply means that the orator is willing to share them. Unlike Canadian Copyright Law, in the Cree world ownership of a set of cassette-recordings does not mean you own the content (p. 34).

According to legal writer David Spratley (2007), "current Canadian copyright law is not well-suited to protecting aboriginal cultural property" (¶ 7). The Canadian copyright term is only the life of the author plus fifty years (¶5), and would thus be inadequate to protect an Aboriginal person's story in perpetuity. The issue is perhaps more related to the need for respect, acknowledgement and shared benefit, and it is possible that these matters may be respected without reference to Western notions of copyright protection. Spratley (2007) went on to say that, "Under Canadian copyright law, the person who makes notes or a report of another person's speech, interview or conversation owns copyright in that report (except when the writer is essentially taking dictation)" (¶ 13), which has resulted in misunderstanding and controversy:

> This scenario has caused controversy when non-aboriginal researchers have ended up owning copyright in written stories and histories by and about aboriginal peoples resulting from their research. This situation can be avoided by simple private legal arrangements, but this is not always contemplated before the fact" (¶ 15).

While my writing is far from a dictation account or a minor edit, for me, issues of ownership and copyright are not clear cut, and I sense a definite literate bias, with literate-based systems of communication taking precedence over orally-based ones (further discussion of this issue occurs at the end of the Methodology section).

It is evident that these issues arise at the juncture of two distinct legal and ethical paradigms and that there is a need for ongoing respectful dialogue to occur in an ethical space that, as Ermine (2001) has suggested, is "a potentially productive and appropriate position from which to express and negotiate an ethical order that crosses

cultural borders" (p. 9). By respecting both worldviews it may be possible "to articulate an ethical research process that speaks in a language of higher possibilities than what is standard in academic scholarship" (p. 9). Schnarch (2004) has dealt with many of these issues in regards to Aboriginal notions of ownership, access, control and possession (OCAP). A thorough exploration of these issues is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I hope that I have treated the matter in an open and respectful manner for all concerned.

My editing of the original interview transcripts was a long and difficult process as I laboured to stay true to my understanding of the speaker's intentions and meanings, while crafting an evocative text that was fluent, concise, and coherent. The participant was invited to review the results of the study before publication to remove any sensitive material and correct any perceived misrepresentation. He was repeatedly asked if the interview transcripts and narrative accurately represented his words and meaning. During the narrative review process I was able to verify the accuracy of my attempts to convey the participant's meaning while making significant lexical and syntactical changes. In my conversations with Dennis, I shared with him that my role felt like that of a translator. I was assured through our conversations that he was satisfied with the result of my efforts at translation. "That's the way I would say it in Cree" (D. Sapp., personal communication, September, 2007). I believe all communication is a form of translation of one sort or another. I hope that by delving beneath the surface utterances and seeking the deep structure of his meaning and intentions, the text I have created will resonate with my participant's intended meaning and convey a sense of who he is.

Trustworthiness

Morrow (2005) suggested that trustworthiness of qualitative research studies may be judged by different standards and assumptions depending on the research paradigm one assumes. Specific criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989) are broadly referred to as *authenticity criteria*: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, and catalytic authenticity. *Fairness* refers to one's openness to seeking and including different constructions**.** *Ontological authenticity* refers to the researcher's role in improving, maturing, expanding, and elaborating the participants' individual constructions. *Educative authenticity* "requires that participants' understandings of and appreciation for the constructions of others be enhanced" (p. 253-254). *Catalytic authenticity* is a measure of the degree to which the research acts as a catalyst for action.

Although Morrow conceptualized the validity or quality of a research study as paradigm bound, she set forth the following as important criteria for the quality of all qualitative studies: social validity, attention to subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and issues related to interpretation and presentation. *Social validity* refers to the social value of research. The research I carried out was not by nature strictly theoretical or abstract. In representing the unique, contextualized story of one Aboriginal man with quadriplegia, the study's value may be judged by its ability to increase awareness of general issues of culture and disability. In order to manage *subjectivity* in qualitative research it is common to make one's "implicit assumptions and biases overt to self and others" (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). Fine (1992) suggested that researchers position themselves as "self-conscious, critical, and participatory

analysts, engaged with but still distinct from our informants" (p. 220). Rather than attempting to overcome or bracket one's subjectivity, it is recommended that one work towards greater self-awareness throughout the research process. It is suggested that this *reflexivity* may be enhanced through the use of a reflective journal, consultation with peer debriefers (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess & Ladany, 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Morrow & Smith, 2000), or as Rossman and Rallis (2003) advised, "using the 'community of practice' made up of knowledgeable colleagues to engage in 'critical and sustained discussion' (p. 69)." Although I chose not to keep a formal reflective journal in the research process, I did make numerous "notes to myself" within the transcript pages and evolving manuscript. I was also able to discuss issues and concerns with numerous peer debriefers in the "community of practice." I also found the internet to be a useful tool in finding a virtual "community of practice," as I had the opportunity to work through numerous methodological quandaries by reading the virtual discussions of others posted on the World Wide Web.

Closely linked to issues of subjectivity are questions of representation. We cannot claim to speak for others, or claim that our representation of another's experience is a true representation, or that true representation for that matter is even possible. In the crisis of representation described by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), researchers must engage with the question of whose reality one is representing, as well as acknowledge that participants are the experts on their own lives, not researchers. I followed the recommendations of Morrow (2005) in my efforts to fairly represent the experiences and realities of my participant, such as "asking for

clarification and delving ever more deeply into the meanings of [the] participant[s], taking the stance of a naïve inquirer" (p. 254). She also recommended participant checks that go beyond the standard transcript check and ask the participant whether or not he or she feels that the representation reflects his or her meanings faithfully. These meaning checks were carried out on the telephone as I re-read each of the transcripts, and later the full narrative, back to the participant. While the intention of the process of re-reading the interview transcripts back to Dennis was to simplify the task, by lessening the amount of mouth writing he would be required to do, I believe this process of telling the participant's story back to him added a powerful dimension of mirroring and witnessing to the research process that enhanced the researcher-participant relationship; it deepened trust and resulted in a richer telling, which in turn contributed to the quality of the narrative.

The *adequacy of data* in qualitative and constructivist research is not necessarily determined by sample size. Patton (1990) recommended that "validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (p. 185). Morrow (2005) suggested that sampling procedures such as the quality, length, and depth of interview data as well as the variety of evidence are more important than sample size (p. 255). The present study sought a deep understanding of one Aboriginal man's life experience and therefore the sample size was just one. Through multiple interviews, I sought to elicit a rich and detailed narrative of the participant's life. The intrinsic motivation for the study at the outset was to gain a deep understanding of this

particular person's life and meaning making. I was fortunate that my participant was, as Patton (1990) termed it, a very "information-rich" case, although I find that language rather depersonalizing, and I will leave the determination of the quality of my "observational/analytical abilities" to the reader.

Another criterion of trustworthiness in qualitative research is *adequacy of interpretation* during the process of data analysis, interpretation, and writing (Morrow, 2005). These processes are "continuous and interactive, often leading the investigator back into the field for additional data" (p. 256). Adequacy of interpretation is reached through immersion in the data during the data gathering, transcription, analysis, and writing phases of the study. By reading and re-reading the transcripts, listening repeatedly to the tapes, and writing and re-writing as I went deeper into the data, I was able to achieve a deep level of immersion in the data.

The quality of *presentation* of research data in qualitative inquiry may be judged in many ways. Richardson (2001) uses five criteria when reviewing texts produced through qualitative research. I found it helpful to keep these points in mind as I wrote. The first criterion is *substantive contribution* and asks the question, "Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life?" (p. 947). The second criterion is *aesthetic merit* and asks the reader, "Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?" (p. 947). The third criterion addresses *reflexivity* and looks at the researcher's self-awareness and self-exposure. An important question here is, "Does the author hold him or herself accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people he or she has studied?" (p. 947). The fourth criterion is *impact* and asks the reader, "Does this affect me? Emotionally?

Intellectually? Does it generate new questions?... Does it move me to action?" (p. 947). The fifth criterion is *expression of a reality* or "Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem 'true'-a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real'?" (p. 947). These were the questions I returned to as I used writing as a means of inquiry and sought to prepare a high quality narrative text. These are the questions I pose to the reader who will judge the quality of this work.

I also referred to Elliot and Richards (1999) review of the literature on standards of quality in qualitative research reports in the preparation of this thesis. Their study identified the following criteria as important in determining which studies are suitable for publication. It was deemed important to own one's perspective (disclose one's personal, theoretical, and methodological orientation, values, and assumptions), situate the sample (provide demographic information on the participants and describe their life circumstances and context), ground findings in examples (support one's interpretations with data), provide credibility checks, be coherent, accomplish general versus specific research tasks, and resonate with readers (present material in a way that expands and clarifies the reader's appreciation and understanding). In the interest of owning my own perspective and being transparent about my interest in and motivation to research this area, I have provided the following personal information.

The Researcher and the Participant

I have been involved with persons with disabilities through friendships, family activities, volunteer work, and paid employment. My paternal great-grandparents and

my paternal grandparents were all active members of the deaf community. My grandfather was a veteran of the First World War. He was a founding member of the Canadian Association for the Deaf, and I am told he was instrumental in the fight to win deaf persons the right to drive. My mother was a special needs specialist working mostly with educable mentally handicapped children. When I was growing up, my family provided ongoing respite care for the parents of a boy with cerebral palsy. He spent many weekends in our home, and I was his main playmate. I volunteered in a community gym and swim program for children with disabilities, and later worked during the summer at an institution for youth with severe mental and physical disabilities. As a massage therapist, I worked with many persons with disabilities, and my use of a sliding fee scale made my services accessible to those living on a limited income. In my first year of graduate school, as previously mentioned, I worked as a personal care attendant at a resident-directed care home, and tutored persons with learning disabilities. I have been active in intercultural living and working as a Rotary exchange student to Brazil for one year, a tutor with newcomers to Canada for the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, and a teacher of English as a Second Language. I have previous experience working with Aboriginal clients as a teacher of Literacy and Adult Basic Education, as a massage therapist, and as an addictions counsellor at a residential treatment centre. I have always been intensely curious and sought out ways to understand and respect diverse ways of being and knowing. My undergraduate degree in Language and Linguistics, and my experiences living, travelling, and working in other cultures have given me a deep appreciation of and respect for diverse ways of being and knowing, as well as a clearer understanding of

myself and my own culture. My personal involvement and academic interest in feminism have given me a powerful understanding of positionality, critical perspectives, and emancipatory discourses. All these experiences have helped prepare me to carry out research, to the best of my ability, which is ethical, collaborative in nature, respectful, and socially relevant.

The research participant for the present study was a resident of the care home I worked at when I started graduate school. The advertisement for the position piqued my interest. The use of the term "resident-directed care" was especially intriguing. I liked the idea of explicitly addressing the autonomy and agency of persons with disabilities. The employee handbook addressed the need to examine the power imbalances that so often go unacknowledged in caregiving relationships:

> In the early stages of the disability movement, professionals were deemed to be the ones with the information, authority, and the insight to direct the lives of persons with disabilities. Surely a person who experiences living with a disability every day has much more knowledge and insight into their preferences and needs than those of us who have not had that life experience. Our role is to do everything possible to facilitate the ability of persons with disabilities to make informed choices as they direct their own lives (Employee Orientation and Reference Handbook, 1999, p.2).

When I began working at the care home, I came to the position with a love and respect for diversity, a desire to consciously navigate the power issues which would inevitably arise, and a desire to come alongside persons with disabilities and gain a deeper understanding of their lived experience. I had no initial intention to research their lives in any formal academic way. This decision came later, as I came to develop friendships with some of the residents. When I was required to carry out a mini-study for a course in introductory research methods, I asked the participant of the present research study if I might interview him for research practice and he

agreed. At that time, my professor suggested that a study of this person's life could make for an excellent thesis project due to the rich data I was able to collect for the mini-study. The participant was Dennis Sapp, a 52-year old Plains Cree man who became a quadriplegic in 1976, at the age of 21. He has been disabled for over 30 years; his reflections on his healing journey have been deepened by time and experience.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval with minor modifications from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Ethics Board on April 5, 2006. Given that I had only one participant for the study and that the participant might be identifiable on account of what he said, the consent form needed to be revised to acknowledge that anonymity could not be guaranteed. It was also suggested that, due to there being only one participant in the study, there might be implicit pressure to continue in the study, and I needed to emphasize to the participant that his participation was voluntary, and that he had the right to withdraw at any time. I was required to remind the participant of his right to withdraw at each interview. There was a suggestion to obtain only oral consent due to the nature of the participant's disability, but in the end, both oral and written consent were obtained, as the participant was able to sign his name using his mouth to hold the pen. A transcript release process was implemented after each and every interview in addition to the final data release for the narrative. I fully disclosed to the participant the purpose of the study. I assured him that I would do all that I could to ensure no harm would come to him as a result of participation in the study. There was concern on the part of my committee that there were risks both to myself

and the participant due to there being only one easily identifiable participant. Discussion of these concerns helped to clarify for me the need for ongoing check-ins with the participant and for continued reflexivity and clear boundaries on my part as a researcher. Concern was also voiced by my committee regarding my previous knowledge of the participant and my role as a former caregiver to the participant. When I discussed these concerns with the participant he indicated that he had only agreed to share his story with me because of our previous contact, and that he would not have been comfortable sharing with an unknown researcher. In the Cree culture, issues of relationship are related to issues of validity. Stevenson (1999) described the ethic of relationship in oral history research from a Cree perspective:

> A conventional historian has little responsibility to his sources other than to treat them with integrity and critically engage them. But in the Cree world our sources are our teachers and the student-teacher relationship proscribes life-long obligations, responsibilities, respect, and trust. The social relations between a teacher and student, more specifically the degree of commitment on the part of the student, determines to a very large degree, the quality and depth of knowledge the student receives (p. 32).

Throughout the research process, I felt a tension between my understanding of the Aboriginal ethic of relationship, reciprocity and mutual benefit in research, and my understanding of the common Western practices of professional detachment, bracketing, and of refraining from the offering or accepting of gifts in the research process. I navigated this tension by following the lead of the participant in regards to the level of familiarity in our interactions and in ongoing conversations around questions of mutual benefit and culturally-appropriate protocol. Consent was re-negotiated throughout the research study. This was in keeping with the process consent model suggested by Cutliffe and Ramcharan (2002) who described the merits

of the “ethics-as-process” approach. Initially consent to participate was obtained, but the participant was informed throughout the research study that he was free to withdraw at any time without consequence. The participant requested that his full name be used in the thesis document. According to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Special Working Committee (SSHWC) (2005) working paper:

> …providing confidentiality may be undesirable, or even disrespectful. In oral history, for example, there is a strong and respectful tradition of naming participants. The same is true of studies involving Indigenous Elders, where naming the individual, with his or her permission, is often essential to showing appropriate respect (Sec. 5.4).

When the participant indicated part way through the research process that he wished to have his full name used in the thesis document, I shifted my efforts from writing in a way that would protect his anonymity, to writing in a way that would protect the interests of third parties mentioned in the narrative. On the advice of my committee, I reviewed the thesis noting all third party references and revisiting the decision to include a particular person or story in the document after considering how that reference added to the reader’s understanding and the purpose of the research. As a result of this process and in consultation with the participant, many names were removed. Any living persons named were contacted for permission to include their name and any material referring to them in the thesis. Two individuals indicated that they did not wish their names to be included in the thesis document. In consultation with the participant, I removed the names of some of the deceased individuals who were named in the thesis, but there were some people whose names the participant felt strongly about including in the thesis. These were persons he wished to honour as

important role models and peer supporters. They were all persons from whom the participant told me he had received verbal permission to speak or write about after their death. The participant was periodically asked if he wished to stop or take a break, and he was advised that if the interview material was disturbing him and he wanted to stop, it was possible to stop at any time. During the research process I asked the participant if participation in the research had brought up any difficult issues that might require him to seek counselling, and if he was aware of appropriate resources and how to access them. Through these conversations, Dennis assured me that he would be able to self-refer if necessary.

Respectful Research with an Aboriginal Person

This study was designed and carried out keeping in mind the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) (2007) *Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples* (At the time I was preparing the research, I referred to what were then the 2005 Draft Guidelines). In this approach, the understanding of what constitutes "health" goes beyond the notion of bio-psycho-social well-being to include spiritual, cultural, community, and environmental well-being. I strove to honour Aboriginal notions of community, which include relationships in a wider context including human, ecological, and spiritual relationships. The research respected that there is a wide diversity and pluralism within Aboriginal culture. The use of a narrative methodology supported the honouring of an individual's unique story and did not include the use of generalization to Aboriginal people as a whole. In the research endeavour, I strove to engage in a respectful ongoing dialogue from research design through to the dissemination of findings. I made every effort to

engage in dialogue with the participant keeping in mind the notion of respectful dialogue occurring in a context in which conversations about intentions, values, and assumptions occur throughout the research process. The research was carried out in a collaborative manner with attention to the importance of relationship building, trust, and reciprocal benefit. The participant was encouraged to inform me of his own values and beliefs in relation to the research, and to educate me regarding appropriate protocol.

In an effort to ensure that benefit sharing occurs, I will share the final results of the study with the participant in the form of a copy of the bound thesis. Also, an effort will be made to share what is learned in written form or oral presentations to help address the health and social issues that are raised in the research. The participant and I will co-own the data, and any secondary use by either will require the consent of the other. This includes the use of interview tapes and transcripts.

I undertook preparation to carry out research with an Aboriginal person, including participation in the Native Studies community outreach program, *Building Bridges*, preparatory reading in the area of ethical research with Indigenous people, such as *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), and attendance at a seminar at the College of Education entitled, *Research Ethics Involving Aboriginal Populations: A Review of the Issues*, presented by Dr. Marie Battiste. My own intercultural experiences living and working in diverse cultures also served as preparation for respectful research with my participant.

Narrative Methodology and the Aboriginal Oral Tradition

Respectful research with an Aboriginal person includes the choice of a methodology that respects and reflects Aboriginal ways of being and knowing. The oral tradition is central to Aboriginal ontology and epistemology, and so it is fitting to carry out research with an Aboriginal person utilizing a narrative methodology. The use of narrative analysis and subsequent presentation of results in the form of an orally-based text can play a role in honouring and strengthening the Aboriginal oral tradition (R. Roberts, personal communication, November 26, 2007). Orally-based forms of sharing knowledge are often not understood or considered acceptable means of analysis in dominant literate-based Western discourse. Gee (1981) described a continuum of communication styles ranging along a continuum from orally-based to literate-based. Traditionally there has been a literate bias in Western culture (Scollon & Scollon, 1981; 1984) and the oral style has been negatively portrayed in comparison to more "literate" styles of speech and writing (Gee, 1981). In the present study I strove to maintain the oral nature of the participant's telling while fitting it into the more literate-based form of a thesis document. While his communication style was decidedly orally-based in nature, in the context of telling his story to a non-Aboriginal researcher for an academic purpose, and as someone who lives "between two worlds" and is familiar with Western academic forms, the participant made choices about how to structure his story that moved it towards the literate-based side of the continuum. For example, in some places he was more explicit and topic-centred, hallmarks of literate-based communication strategies (Gee, 1981), while in others he used a more orally-based communication strategy, more in keeping with Aboriginal culture, to convey meaning. Aboriginal stories are participatory in nature

(Blaeser, 1999; Ortiz, 1977). In Aboriginal storytelling there is a multiplicity of possible meaning and meaning is implicit and must be inferred by the listener or reader. Story is a "distinctive mode of explanation characterized by an intrinsic multiplicity of meanings" (Carter, 1993, p. 6). McLeod (2007) provided an example of this from his own family: "My grandfather never said what the points of his stories were; he forced the listeners to discover this for themselves" (p. 13). He described Aboriginal narratives as "open-ended [and with] no end to how they can be interpreted" (p. 17). In more literate-based styles of communication, knowledge is conveyed with a more linear, explicit, explanatory style that is often imbued with an all-knowing authority. Orally-based styles of communication situate knowledge contextually and temporally and are characterized by a humility not evident in literate-based styles which, more often than not, tend towards expert, singular truth claims and adversarial debate. As a way of honouring Aboriginal ways of being and knowing, the Results section of the present study consists of a first-person narrative written in a manner that preserves many elements of Aboriginal storytelling. I tried to write as if the reader were party to a conversation with the inclusion of phrases such as, "I don't know if I ever told you, but…," to convey an intimacy and an immediacy characteristic of storylistening, and to draw the reader into an empathic connection with the participant.

I invite the reader to listen and to hear what it means to be an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia, and to experience a way of understanding this experience that resonates with Aboriginal ways of being and knowing. I invite the reader to hear the meaning in what the participant explicitly states in his explanations and sense-

making, as well as to hear the meaning that is implicitly conveyed for you to make sense of as you will, keeping in mind Cherokee writer Betty Bell's (1994) description of the experience of storylistening in her novel *Faces of the Moon*:

> I listened, their stories settling forever in my blood, and I knew the stories were told and told not for carrying but for keeping. They heard, and they taught me to hear, the truth in things not said. They listened, and they taught me to listen in the space between words (p. 56-57).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

maskosis:

The Healing Journey of Little Bear

Dennis Sapp otâcimowin

This is Dennis Sapp's story.
I am grateful to him for sharing it with me, and giving me permission to create a written representation of it and, in so doing, to act as a conduit for its retelling. I hope that my writing has been faithful to the speaker's meanings and intentions.

maskotêw-askiy-yôtin: prairie wind

Birth and Early Childhood

Birth

My name is Dennis Sapp. I'm Plains Cree from the Little Pine Reserve near North Battleford, Saskatchewan, and I'm fluent in my Cree language. If you want to know about my life as an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia, I think I would start right from the beginning, and right up to where I am now, because I think it will make sense, my being a quad.

I was born in late summer and delivered in the old way by a medicine woman on the reserve who was also a lay midwife. She attended hundreds of births in our community. My mother gave birth to me outside in the woods. It had something to do with our traditional beliefs, children being born outside. It was September. September 1st was my date. At least they figured that's when it was, but nobody knew for sure. It was around then anyway, because the leaves were starting to turn yellow; they were starting to fall. It was outside and my grandmother pitched a tent in a grove of trees. They made a special shelter in the bush, with animal skins attached to a long pole, in the centre of that grove of trees. It was all covered with berries and there would have been prairie lilies all around. The door was facing south. This was out in the bush on our reserve, alongside the Battle River.

And that old lady was Winona Frank. Her real name was Winona Goosenose, not Frank. The English just gave her that name when they came over, I guess. I think it was her great grandfather's name. He was a good hunter, I guess, and he used to collect those goose beaks. That's how she got her name, anyway. She was the

medicine woman at that time and she used to heal people. And what she did was fascinating. She put a brace, like a log, between two tree trunks and wrapped it with fur. The log was at the height of my mom's torso and my mom leaned over that so that she could push against her belly with each contraction. So she was standing over a bowl when I dropped out. She wasn't lying down on her back. That's how a woman used to give birth. And there were no complications, nothing like what we have today. And it was out in Mother Nature. Traditionally that's how they did it. Because I asked my grandmother once how I became, when I fell out. The first one that grabbed me was my grandmother, and when she grabbed me she prayed right away. I didn't start breathing right way, and that medicine woman fanned me with an eagle feather to start me breathing. She used an eagle feather over my head and nose. She waved an eagle feather over my face and I took my first breath.

And then how they go about it is they use moss, you know. There was no such thing as diapers back then. That was the way. There was no such thing as diaper rash, no ointments, no medicine. Just ordinary moss from the forest is what she used. Everything was ready, like today, when you've got everything set up.

I figured that tree that my mom stood under was probably a willow. Because they were strong. And I figured that's where the midwife used to come and deliver babies, at that same place. And I still remember that place, where it's at and all that, where I was born. I still remember. I go back there once in a while. And those poles are still there. Because a willow, eh, you can't break. It's the strongest. That's what they make the arrows from, the willow stick. It'll take you a long time to break it, and

that's why, and you can tell that branch was used and re-used, and she used to clean it probably.

And the thing about it is, every time a child was born back then they held a traditional dance. There was a feast of being thankful that I was born, being thankful that I came out, not with any diseases, nothing like that, just pure. My mom didn't hardly drink when she was pregnant, not like today, you hear about FAS, things like that. And she didn't have any substances in her because my grandfather used to tell her to quit when she was pregnant and that.

And they used to go alone, they used to go alone out in the bush. Like alone with my *kohkom* [*nohkom*] and the medicine woman, just the women, and there would have been other women around at the time of my birth. It wasn't only me. There were two of us that got born that day. Two women gave birth September 1st. I still remember that other one, and she's still alive today. She was born in towards the evening. Me, I was born early in the morning. And they used to be out there right away when their water broke. They stayed out there throughout the whole labour, so they brought food, everything they needed. They lived there for one to three days. And then they would carry the baby home. The father was waiting, I guess. Not like today, what you see today. And then I never got registered, like to get monies for that. They called it allowance back then, family allowance. She was supposed to get $20 a month, I guess, but she didn't register me until I was about six, so she got six years of back pay, and that was a lot of money back then.

Early Childhood

I didn't start talking English until I went to residential school, that's when I started talking English. But before that I learned my culture, my own culture, because I lived with my grandparents as a baby. My *kohkom* took me from the time I dropped out, because my mom had her hands full. My brother Bill was only 18 months old when I was born. Well, my *kohkom* came to my mom, I guess, and she wanted to see if I could go and live with them, so that's how I started my life with my *mosôm* [*nimosôm*] and my *kohkom*. These are my grandparents on my mother's side. I stayed with them through the years, until I was about six anyway. My grandparents were Tom and Harriet Sapp. My grandmother was from the Sweet Grass Reserve. Her real name at birth was Harriet Atcheynum**.** My grandfather was a WWII veteran at Normandy. After the war he stayed on in Europe and worked in a bush camp. I think he came home in the early fifties. Nobody knew what happened to him, because there was no electricity on the reserve in those days. There were no telephones. His wife thought he had died in the war and she remarried.

I had a large extended family all living on the Little Pine Reserve. My grandparents each had kids of their own. My mom had left home already. My auntie Alice was gone, but there were my mom's two half sisters and a brother that were there when I went to live with them. Everybody took care of me, but I was especially babied by my grandparents. I still remember the tender loving care I used to get from my *mosôm* and my *kohkom*. And everything was spoken in Cree all the time. I didn't hear any English ever—no English at all, because my *mosôm* used to talk to me in Cree all the time, so I learned my own language as a child. By the time I was two, I was calling my grandmother, *"nohkom"* and my grandfather, "*nimosôm"*. I knew

who my mom and dad were, and my mom used to come and visit us. I knew that was my mom. I knew who my dad was. And it didn't bother me to live with my grandparents. Today people get all mixed up over who their biological father is and things like that.

I was taught the old traditional ways by my *mosôm*. He taught me about respect, honesty, wisdom, and knowledge. And *sâkihiwêwin*, love, he taught me with love. He disciplined me in a gentle, loving way, like he wouldn't hit me, no, nothing like that. He always stressed the importance of guidance, support, and obedience in life. He talked about it and he modelled these things in his life as well. My *mosôm* taught me how to survive on the land. He taught me how to hunt and trap. These things were taught to me by my *mosôm*. Like snaring. We used to go snaring rabbits. We used to snare prairie chickens. Just for survival, just to eat, because on the reserve you had to have a permit to go into town, to leave the reserve, so we had to provide our own food. Things like salt, sugar, flour, and bacon were brought onto the reserve by the Indian Agent, but mostly we hunted for food.

I remember one time my *mosôm* came and woke me up. It was early in the morning. I must have been four or five at the time and he said to me, "Come on, Dennis. Let's go! We're going to see if we can catch some rabbits." It took about four hours to check all the snares. We rode on horseback following the trail through the woods, and we stopped along the way. My *mosôm* made a fire for us to cook over. I remember before we ate he cut off the rabbit's ear and left it in the woods, and I asked him why he was doing that. "Dennis, when we kill something, when we take something from Mother Earth, we try and put something back. It's our culture. It's for

your spiritual side. You have to give something back." That's what he used to tell me all the time, "I always pray and give something back to Mother Earth," he told me, "because the Creator gave us this. Mother Earth gave us this to eat. After this, when we're full, we'll give thanks again that we ate and ask for forgiveness from the animal we have taken." My *mosôm* used to say that our Mother Earth is like a person. We have veins in our bodies carrying the life force throughout our bodies, and she is made the same way. He taught me to respect the body of our Mother Earth and to put something back if I took something from Her. At the very least, I was to say a prayer of thanks and ask for forgiveness if I was unable to provide something in return. Those are the things I remember still. To this day I always pray and give thanks before I eat. That's what my *mosôm* showed me. To be thankful, even if you can't put anything back, at least pray and give thanks. I remember when my *mosôm* went hunting and he would come back with a moose or a deer. He always shared. I always remember the other old people coming to visit him. They didn't tell us to go and mind our own business. We knew our place. We knew where we could go and we knew when to leave without being told. And I always knew where my place was.

When we went trapping we used to follow our own trails in the bush. My *mosôm* always told me not to stray from the path. One time he let me go out by myself to check our snares. A rabbit escaped from a snare and I ran after it and into the woods. I went off the trail and was lost in the bush. I started to get scared, but I remembered what my *mosôm* always told me and so the bush panic never settled in. He always told me not to panic if I lost my way. He told me to trust that the Creator was always there looking out for me. I managed to find my way home eventually

once I found the river and followed it to the crossing, and when I arrived back home my *mosôm* laughed because he had been following me the whole time to see if I would be able to find my way back. He wanted to make sure I could find my way back to the trail without panicking. He told me, "You know, Dennis, you have to make your own path in life, and follow it. Always choose the right path." When I was in the residential school I felt fear just like when I was lost in the woods that day. I lost my way, and when I was in my teens I got into alcohol and I strayed from my true path. After my injury, I started remembering all the things my *mosôm* had taught me. He used to say that in real life, "*ka-wanisinin,*" he used to tell me, "You'll get lost, but when you go astray and lose your way in real life, you have to try and find your way back to the right trail and never leave it." Now I understand what he meant. I've found my way through the fear and I'm back on the right path.

My *mosôm* was a man who felt things deeply. It was like he was in a trance sometimes. He cried so many different kinds of tears. One time I saw him crying while he was praying, and I asked him why, why he was crying, and he told me, "Well, Dennis, you have to pray--when you pray you have to cry because you have to let the Creator know that you're really, really thankful," he said. Sometimes he cried tears of remorse, and he prayed to the Creator for forgiveness, for all the things he had done wrong in the past. I think the things that happened during the war still affected him. And sometimes he would cry tears of joy. He was so glad to be alive. When my *mosôm* prayed, it was such a sincere and heartfelt prayer and he would go to such a deep place. Sometimes I do that when I pray.

When my *mosôm* was doing ceremonies, like Sundances or sweats, he taught me the proper way to do things. He wanted me to be an *oskâpêwis*. In Cree that means, "Elder's helper." Sometimes, I would keep the fire burning in those ceremonies, or when we had feasts I would pass the food around to the people, from the time I was a small child. At those feasts, people always sat in a circle. When I was an *oskâpêwis*, I had the sense of belonging to the group, of being a part of the life of everyone there as I passed out the food. Eight or ten *oskâpêwis* would all be working for one Elder tending the fire or passing out food. The feast is how we look at things, spiritually, that's where we all come together, everyone talking and visiting. It's not like that anymore. It seems the only time we all come together like that now is at a funeral.

And my *mosôm* used to treat horses just like how people today take care of their cars. That's the way he treated the horse. He respected the horse. He never hit him, nothing like that. And I remember these things from when I was growing up. I forgot these things for a long time, but then I started remembering them, especially memories from when I was three or four years old, the starting of these things.

I used to remember there was nothing like loneliness in my family back then, only cheerfulness. Today I'm sometimes lonely, but I learned that at residential school, but like evil, I didn't see anything evil in my family, nothing, and there was no fighting. I don't remember them fighting or arguing, like I said, nothing like that. So, I kind of figured they were living the old traditional way. I used to wonder how my ancestors lived. There would be 10,000 people living together like that. Sharing.

Respecting each other. People knew where their places were. And I knew where my place was, at that time.

papâmâcihow-âcâhk wanihcikêw: wandering spirit

Abduction,
Life at Residential School,
and Life After Residential School

Abduction

Sometimes my grandparents would let me go into the woods alone. I would do what my *mosôm* taught me. I started learning from him what he did during the day, all the old ways: snaring rabbits and preparing the skins and the meat, offering the prayers, things like that. One morning, I went out early to snare rabbits and, when I came back home, there was a car there. I had never seen a car before, because cars weren't allowed on reserves, and we weren't allowed to drive. I saw that car and it was the first time I had ever seen one, and I was awed at this car. I went up to that car and started touching it. I can remember it like it was yesterday and I laugh just thinking about it. I couldn't figure out how it ran, without horses, I mean. These men were speaking to me in English, and I could figure out what they meant by their gestures, but I didn't speak English at that time. I was trying to ask them about the car, and they lifted up the hood and showed me the engine. These were Indian Agents, I guess.

At that time, they were picking up Indian kids and forcing them to attend residential school. When they went into our house and came out again, I assumed they must have spoken with my grandparents, but it turned out they weren't home at the time. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. They saw me checking out the car, and they offered me a ride by motioning for me to get in the back seat. I was happy to ride in a car for the very first time, to see how it felt, and I noticed some

candies in the back seat and that kind of lured me in. They pointed at the treats and said, "You can eat all the candies you want." And this was a luxury for me to eat candy, to eat a chocolate bar, to drink a Coke. So, I got into the back seat of the car and they drove away.

I was having so much fun riding in the car and eating the candies that I lost track of the time. As we drove around the reserve they were picking up other kids. There must have been at least six of us young kids in the back seat there, and then we were taken to a little town called Paynton. When we got there they were feeding people sandwiches and soup, things like that. I saw about three other big yellow buses parked there, and they were all full of kids. I wasn't sure what was going on, because it was a treat for us to go into town. We used to take a horse and buggy to go into town. We never had cars, nothing like that. And I was surprised when I got there, and I thought, holy man, I sure have a lot of friends here to play with, but then all of a sudden they told us to get on the buses. We were leaving and I didn't know what was going on. They took us to this place called Onion Lake, and there was a residential school there.

My grandparents didn't even know where I was. They didn't even know. You know, my *mosôm* told me the first time he knew that I was at the residential school was about Christmas. That was the first he knew of it, and I guess when they came home that day, the day the Indian Agents took me, he went out looking for me, because I had just left my horse standing there, my horse I used to take in the mornings, and I had left about ten rabbits hung over the horse's neck. My *mosôm* figured I had either drowned or been thrown off the horse along the way, and he used

to go looking for me down by the river. The Battle River runs through our reserve, and he figured I might have fallen in and drowned. My *kohkom* told me, "Oh, your grandfather used to go looking for you every morning, Dennis, and sometimes during the day, he used to go walking down by the river."

They didn't even know what had happened to me**.** Nobody knew. We were living alone in an isolated area in the bush. The closest house was about two miles away, and there were no roads. We had an Indian Agent there living on the reserve and he never said a word to my grandfather. He never told him what happened to me, no. Not until Christmas. Around Christmas time, they came and told my family where I was, to see if they wanted me to come home and visit over Christmas. So, they came to the residential school and took me back home at Christmas time. Holy man, you know, I had never seen my *mosôm* cry like that, he was so happy to see me. Oh boy, he never left me alone after that. He wanted to know where I was all the time, and he wouldn't let me out of his sight. He was so glad to see me. Here all this time he figured I'd drowned. And then we had to go back to school after Christmas. We used to go back the day after New Year's Day. The buses would drive around the reserve picking kids up to take them back to residential school. At that time we only had wagon trails; there were no such thing as roads there, at that time anyway.

The first thing I noticed about the school was that there was a high fence all the way around the property, and I was wondering what that fence was for. I didn't realize until later that that was our boundary, and we were not supposed to go past that fence. They had us fenced in.

These strange women met us there. They wore long dresses and their heads were covered, with only their hands and faces showing. And I remember seeing their light-coloured eyes for the first time, all blue and green. I had never seen people like that, and it scared me, to tell you the truth.

Anyway, when we arrived, they put us in lines. I think I was right in the middle, and I remember they were passing out pants. We were supposed to take all our clothes off. Everything. They were giving us these coveralls, boots, runners, and rubber boots, but the first thing I noticed they gave us were numbers. Until now, it never dawned on me that none of us was ever called by our real name. It was all by numbers. They lined us up and numbered us off, and they wrote the numbers on our foreheads with a black felt pen. The pen washed off after about a week, but by then the nuns already knew our numbers. Beside my name it would say "51". We didn't even use our real names, even among the other kids. We used our numbers all the time to call out to one another: "Hey, '53!'" My brother was '12', because he was the 12th person in line that first day. To this day, I can still remember other people's numbers. They never called us by our names; even in the classroom we weren't called by our names. They used the numbers and everything was marked, even our clothes were marked, so if I lost my pants I was out to look for them. They marked our shoes, and we had little closets. Everything was marked with our number. Our beds were marked, our seats were marked with our numbers, and they told us, "Don't ever forget your numbers." I remember my number to this day, and all that time I didn't even know who Dennis was, because I was "Number 51."

I think this was when I started to have the fear in my head. Well, I think I was scared because it was all so different, and I didn't know what was happening. I thought it was just for a day. I thought it was a big celebration of some kind. I didn't know I was going to be there for the rest of my childhood. But for awhile, I have to admit, I kind of liked it. It was an adventure for maybe a week, and then kids started crying. We must be here for some reason we figured. That was when the fear started, after about a week or so. Up until then I was enjoying all the new experiences. That was the first time I had ever ridden in a motorized bus with other kids. It wasn't anything like the little horse-drawn sleigh my *mosôm* drove to take the older kids to the little day school on our reserve. I used to sit next to him as he made the rounds of the reserve. Up until that point in my life I didn't know about fear. There was no such thing as fear for me at that moment. And that fear comes to mind today, vividly, as I talk about these things. I was so scared of what was going to happen to me. I didn't know what my future would bring. I had thought all this time by the end of the day I would be going back home to my family.

They never explained anything to us. I had never been told about school. Nobody prepared me for that. The buildings were so huge. I had never seen buildings that big before and it awed me. I was surprised to see buildings with so many stories. And there was a playground there. I remember how excited I was thinking, "Hey, I can play!" But that was a just a positive sideline to the whole situation.

On that first day they had an orientation. We toured the whole school. We were shown the classrooms, and the dorms where we were to sleep. They showed us the girls' dorm, and told us never to go there. And then they showed us where we

were supposed to eat, and our recreation rooms, things like that. The last place they showed us was the church. They took us two by two to a little balcony, and then we went along this hallway and into the church. They led us down the stairs to where the pews were. I bet you that church held at least 300 people. That's how big that church was. And what I noticed right away were the statues. They were lit up from behind and there were paintings all around them. Most of the kids started crying when we went into the church. There were tall statues of the saints, bigger than me, and I had never seen anything like that before. And right in the middle there was a body nailed to a cross with blood dripping all over it. I was terrified because I thought this was going to happen to me. I thought that was real blood.

At the back of the church there were these little doors. I didn't know what these little doors were for until later. That was where we had our confessions, the so-called confessions. And then there was a place where altar boys changed off to one side. Where we stored our slippers and gowns, things like that, to wear for the priests. Once the tour was over, they told us to prepare for supper, and then after supper that first night they lined up all the little boys like me and cut off our hair. Hair is a big part of our Native culture. That was when most of the crying started, because it was nightfall, and they told us to go to bed, and we didn't know what was happening. I felt afraid, but I reassured myself that surely the next day we would be going home.

Life at Residential School

The residential school I attended was called St. Anthony's. It was on the Onion Lake Reserve about 60 miles north of Lloydminster. Being sent to residential school and forced to assimilate changed my whole life. I've had a lot of trauma in my

life, and this was where it all started. I was taken from my home and family. They cut us off from our culture and Cree language. It was a total culture shock. The hardest part was the lack of tender loving care. I missed the warmth and affection of my grandparents. Right off the bat they started taking away my culture when they cut off my hair, but today I wear it long again, in a braid, and every time one of the care aides brushes my hair, I pray and remember my *mosôm*.

We were segregated from the girls, so even though my sister ended up attending the school, we rarely saw one another. The nuns divided the boys into two groups. The "big boys" were ten years old and up, and they lived up another flight of stairs. They had special privileges. They could go to bed at nine, whereas us "little boys" had to go to bed at seven. We had to do everything early, like we had to eat at five o'clock and the bigger boys could eat any time they wanted. We didn't have the same rights as the bigger boys.

Our days were tightly scheduled with school, church, and work. Our day would begin at 6 o'clock. They would wake us up by 6 o'clock. By half past six we were all dressed and ready to go down for a mass at 7 o'clock and this mass would be about 45 minutes long. By 8 o'clock we were supposed to be downstairs eating our breakfast which consisted of oatmeal and a slice of toast with peanut butter. That was about it for our breakfast. And then we had to do our chores. We had to finish them by half past eight.

My first chore was to wash the stairs on my hands and knees, with soap and a little scrub brush. That was my chore every day, for about two years anyway. The school building was about three or four stories high, so you know how many flights

of stairs there were. When I was finished, the nun would check my work, and if it wasn't perfect, if she saw even a speckle of dust on one stair, I had to go back and redo the whole staircase. That was how strict and unfair their discipline was. I figured this was a whole new take on discipline. The way my *mosôm* disciplined us was way different than that.

The nuns would walk around with these straps. They were rubber straps, in the shape of beaver tails, and I remember thinking how odd it was that somebody had actually manufactured those, because they looked like customized belts. Somewhere out there, there was a factory where they made belts for whipping kids. They had non-slip handles, and they were designed to be held with two hands, so they could hit you harder. And most of the nuns wore those on their hips, but not in plain view. They kept the straps hidden under these long black dresses they wore, with just the handle sticking out. To remind you, so you would obey them. Just the sight of that handle was enough to scare us.

Everything evil that I did, I learned in there; that's where I learned to lie and steal. That's where I learned to hate people. And how to fight. If they caught you fighting they would take you to a little garage, and all the nuns would gather to watch. It reminded me of Roman times when they used to watch fights in the arena. If you gave up, the nuns would hit you. Most of the time I would win my fights, and they would reward me with apples and punish the guy I beat up. It was like entertainment for them. If they caught you speaking your own language, they would throw you in a cold shower. If you were talking out of turn, they would write you down, and then you weren't allowed attend the matinee. We used to get to watch movies, and that

was a luxury for us, because we had never seen films before. We hated to miss the shows, like they would put on Westerns with cowboys and Indians, and I remember watching Elvis Presley, The Three Stooges, and Tarzan. Those were my favourites.

The main thing I lost at residential school was my culture and my spirituality. Thankfully, I still have my Cree language, because when I went home my grandparents spoke to me in Cree. Our culture wasn't even mentioned. All the books we read were about the white people, or if they talked about people of different cultures it was African or Chinese people, but nothing about Indian people, except the movies about cowboys and Indians, that is. And the thing about it is that we were different tribes in there at that residential school. Some of us were Saulteaux, some were Dene, but it was mostly Cree people where I went, and a few Métis. When the nuns weren't around, we spoke secretly to one another in Cree, although we couldn't always understand each other. You had to be careful because the nuns had informers, so you kind of kept quiet. You had to have friends you could trust.

At the residential school they tried to turn us into Roman Catholics. They called us pagans and savages, and told us that our traditional spirituality was evil. "Your Elders are praying to the Devil," they used to tell us, and I think that's where I got lost, because I used to ask them, "Well, why is Jesus on a cross?" They never told us anything about it, what really happened to him. Never. And I just thought, if I'm not careful, that's what's going to happen to me. At least, that's what the bigger boys were telling me. Native Elders weren't allowed to visit the school until many years later. We were so brainwashed into believing our traditional ways were wrong. That's how I lost my name. They took away the spiritual guide name my grandfather had

given me. Even when I started to go back to my own tradition, I was afraid, because those messages were still there. When I took part in a Sundance ceremony, it didn't feel right at first. It took me a long time to realize that this was our church. They had me so brainwashed into believing that it was a sin to take part in Native ceremonies. There was no concept of sinning in our traditional spirituality. It was the white man that gave us all that talk of sin. They even went so far as to say that if we followed our culture, we would be committing a mortal sin. That way of talking isn't even a part of our culture. I don't remember the Elders ever putting down any other religion. And all this time they were telling us not to sin, and so many of us were being beaten and abused.

The nuns used to watch us in the shower. They would make 30 students shower together at a time. They didn't all need to be in there. Two or three of them didn't need to be in the shower room at the same time. Many of us experienced sexual abuse by the nuns. I remember the first day when this happened to me. I was about eight or nine years old. The nun came into the dorm in the middle of the night and called out, "Number 51." She took me back to her room. I remember it was a really nice room, with a lamp and a shiny new brass bed. The nuns slept on comfortable mattresses, but we had to sleep on boards. Up until this point, I had never seen anything but the nuns' hands and faces. All this time I thought they must be bald under those veils. This was the first time I ever saw blond hair. The abuse was confusing to me. It was the closest thing to the tender loving care of my *kohkom* that I experienced at residential school, and it wasn't until years later that I could name it as abuse. Because it was a woman, I figured that couldn't be abuse. I took it as my

kohkom's tender loving care, but my *kohkom* never would have done anything like that to me. But at the time, I didn't understand. I was just a child.

I don't know how many other kids got abused, but it was lots. It wasn't just the nuns; there were lay people who worked at the school and lived nearby who also abused kids. One time I snuck out at night to see what was going on at our teacher's house, just down the road from the school. Peering in the window, I could see some of my classmates sitting around the table eating the finest foods, like chicken and that, and then all of a sudden it would go dark, and then the kids would come out later, maybe two or three of them. And they wouldn't say anything. Those kids got money and gifts. There was a teacher of ours, and one time my brother and I caught him in the act, and soon after that we cornered him at night and told him that if he ever touched us we'd kill him. I don't think we would have ever carried out those threats, but he must have taken them seriously, because he left us alone after that. We could tell which kids he was abusing, though, because they always had the best stuff: hockey sticks, shirts, and money to buy things. If you'd told your family what was going on, they wouldn't have believed you anyway, but this was going on at that school, and there was nothing we could do to stop it.

Kids started trying to run away. They climbed over the high fence. Most of them got lost, and I figured some kids didn't make it. The nuns used to tell us that they couldn't find them, but I figured some of them must have drowned, because they had to cross the North Saskatchewan River to get home, and there were no bridges. You had to take a ferry or else swim. And you knew that if the ferryman spotted an Indian kid from the residential school, he was going to phone the school right away,

or else the cops or the RCMP. There were a few kids who never came back, and the nuns told us they must have made it home. But we figured they must have drowned or something, and maybe the cops found their bodies in the river and sent them home. They made it home alright. In a pine box. Some of the kids were picked up by the police and brought back to the school. You could tell by their bruises that they'd been beaten up. And then, on top of that, they were punished by the nuns. The nuns would gather all the boys and girls together in the yard to watch, to show us what would happen to kids who tried to run away. They would whip four or five kids at a time. The nuns made them strip right down to their shorts, naked right down to their shorts. They would set up several chairs in the middle of this ring for the kids to sit on, and then right off the bat they cut off their hair, right down to the scalp, and sometimes they cut so deep it bled.

First they cut their hair, and then they told them to turn around and hold onto the back of the chair. The nuns would whip them until they fell off. I counted to fifty one time. Fifty times she whipped that boy, right on the butt and then on the back. I remember him falling to the ground as he was being whipped, and the nun kept on hitting him, even when he was down. Even after a week some of those kids couldn't sit right, it hurt so much. The bigger boys were whipped with hockey sticks. They never hit you on the face. When there was no room left to hit you on the back or the butt, they started hitting your arms.

And most of the kids started bawling, and they were hit and told to keep quiet. We were getting hit to keep quiet. There was no such thing as what my *kohkom* taught me, no tender loving care. The nuns never gave us any hugs. Never. And we

weren't allowed to hug each other. The only thing they showed us was the whip. My *kohkom* never hit me. She would always hug and kiss me, and she would pray for me when I went out snaring. We weren't treated like that, and that's when I started to feel lonely. I used to go off alone and cry. I figured the nuns liked to see you cry, especially when they hit you. They wanted to see you cry. But any time I got hit I never cried. I never gave them that satisfaction. They would hit me and hit me, boy, harder and harder. Then they would tell me to go in the corner and pray for my sins. We spent so much time praying, and to this day, I know a lot of people who went to residential school who have arthritis in their knees and elbows, from all the kneeling down and praying we had to do. That was our punishment.

When I was around eight or nine years old, I became a kitchen worker and graduated from cleaning stairs to peeling carrots and potatoes. I worked in the kitchen morning, noon, and night, so there was hardly any time for me to study or mingle with my friends, but I didn't mind because sometimes I got to eat the odd apple when the supervisor wasn't looking. And I started stealing food for my friends because, you see, we were hungry all the time. That really affected us, and that was where a lot of us learned to survive by stealing. Like the ones I'm doing counselling with. We can laugh about it now. My old residential school buddies still tease me about it. When we were in school together they used to call me, "*okimotisk*". That was my nickname. It means "The Thief." In the middle of the night I used to sneak down to the kitchen, because I knew where the food was kept. The kitchen was always locked, but I would sneak in through the dining room. Up high, where we kept our towels, there was a little hole, just big enough for me to squeeze through and jump down into the kitchen.

But the thing about it was, before I hopped down, I had to make sure I set up a ladder in the kitchen so I could climb back out. One time, I forgot and I was stranded there all night. When they found me there in the morning, I lied, "Hey you guys forgot me in here!" but they knew what I had been up to. I remember I jumped up and down all night, trying to reach that hole. I set up pail after pail. That's what gave me away. They saw all the pails in a pile by the hole.

After I got caught they fired me and sent me to work in the fields. We raised cows and chickens and planted vegetables. I didn't mind being a farmer's helper. That's how I later became a farm labourer after residential school. I didn't really enjoy school in those days. I would rather work outside. I was strong and I enjoyed hard work, but the thing is, we ran a poultry farm there, but we never ate chicken or eggs. I remember gathering a lot of eggs, and I used to wonder where the heck all these eggs were going. Here they were having eggs for breakfast and feasting on chicken dinners. The only foods we ever saw on the menu were the vegetables we grew. I remember picking a lot of carrots and storing them in the root cellar. We had big gardens and we grew all our own food. The only thing we had to bring in was bread.

Well, that was some of what I experienced at residential school. You have to remember, it wasn't only me. There was a hundred of me in there. We experienced corporal punishment, sexual abuse, mental and emotional abuse, all these things. That's how we became today's society, I think. That's why there are so many Aboriginal people in jail. And the effects are still being felt in the lives of our children and their children. I know that my kids were affected. I didn't even know

how to love my kids. I never hugged them, to tell you the truth. See, if my life had not been interrupted like that, if I had continued my childhood under the care and teaching of my *mosôm*, with all the love and affection of my *kohkom*, I would be a different man today. I would have been a better person right from the start. I would have grown up respecting people and appreciating things. I would have always known how to love. But instead, I was sent to residential school, and I came out with a deep hatred of white people, because these were white people who were teaching us, who were doing these awful things to us. And it took me so long to heal from the trauma, and I'm still healing from that. I was so full of fear for such a long time. I carried the fear and hatred with me for a long time, and I went on to be verbally and emotionally abusive in my relationships with women. I hurt a lot of people.

Life After Residential School

I was at the residential school until the age of about 14. The good part was I learned how to read and write and, even though that helped me to adapt to life in the New World, it wasn't enough. The system was so different from what we were used to. We were so unprepared for life on the outside. We weren't taught about money and time, you know, things like that, and everything, from the time you woke up until you went to bed, everything was set out for you to follow, so you never learned to think for yourself.

At the end of every school year, social workers came to the residential school and picked up the kids to place them with foster families, so they could go to high school. My uncle and I decided to run away. This was after Grade 8. I must have been about 13 or 14 years old then. This was in June. We hitchhiked from Lloydminster to

Edmonton. We didn't even know where we were headed, but we saw a big sign that read "Edmonton, so many miles", so we decided we'd go there.

We spent the summer sleeping in the park and we stole money to survive, but later I met this white woman, and she took us in, or else I would've ended up on the streets for sure. She had the luxury of having an apartment, having a car and money, and that's when I started learning things about living in the city, seeing how she went about things. She let me use her car and gave me money, which I spent on drugs and alcohol. She became my girlfriend. She was much older than me. She was an educated woman with a professional job. I lived there for about a year and a half. She really wanted a child, and we produced a baby boy. Then I got caught and I was picked up by the social workers. And my uncle, too. He got picked up as well.

Once we got the go ahead from Indian Affairs, we were sent to Elrose. They sent us there for high school, and we lived with a foster family. I ended up moving back and forth from Elrose to Edmonton over the years. I'd quit school and take off for awhile. In the summers I'd go home to the reserve. My mom wanted me to help out with the little kids.

Learning to read and write helped me adapt to high school life, but not enough. It was such a change living in Elrose. There was nobody there to pat you on the back and say you did a good job on your homework. I never did my homework anyway. I would rather get the chores done. I would help in the kitchen peeling vegetables or out in the barn feeding the cows, instead of doing my homework. The young white kids were right into their homework, because they were *told* to do these things, so they did a good job, but me I never got much encouragement for

academics. Even the teachers didn't want to help us. I figured they were kind of racist, some of them anyway. I remember this one teacher would point at all the students he thought he would fail, and we were pointed at right away.

The people we lived with were good people, don't get me wrong. They never hit us, nothing like that. We respected them. My foster dad was a big farmer with a lot of land to deal with. He had cows and horses. That was the best part, because we used to ride those horses every chance we got. We never sat still. The only time we stopped to watch T.V. was when there was a hockey game on, or else when something broke down. There was no such thing as video games, nothing like that. We were outside all the time, never mind sitting around the house like these young kids today.

In a way, it was a good place for me. I learned how to farm, how to run a combine, how to run trucks and tractors. We had all different kinds of meals, really good meals. The best time was harvest time. I liked getting up early in the morning. They fed you eggs and bacon. I remember the sunsets. I used to stand on my tractor and watch those incredible prairie sunsets, things like that come to mind right away. And they'd feed us out in the field. Holy man, those potato salads were good, all fresh, right from the garden usually. These are some of the things that come to mind. And we'd all work together right into the middle of the night, until two or three o'clock in the morning sometimes. And we'd be up at the crack of dawn to work. We never had this nonsense of sleeping in, and that reminded me of the way I was taught by my *mosôm*. He used to tell me, "Dennis, get up! You can sleep all you want when you're dead." It reminded me of that. You were ready to go and work and you knew

what was ahead of you, what was expected of you. And I especially liked the bailing. Anyway, the harvest, that was my favourite time.

My uncle and I went to an all-white school, way down south near Swift Current, and there were no Indians living there. We were the first Indians at that high school, and it took us at least a year to adapt. Residential school didn't prepare us to deal with the racism we faced. These young kids started calling us things like, "Chief Sitting Bull" or "Geronimo", but the way I took it was that those were great chiefs and it was just like being called Wayne Gretsky, the famous hockey player. Sometimes the girls would pinch their noses when we were passing them in the hallway. I didn't know it was directed towards us. I just laughed and said, "Oh, which of you girls farted now?" That's how I took it, until I realized, hey, they were calling us names. By the second year, once we got to know the students really well, we weren't treated like outsiders. They stopped ganging up on us three against one. That's what we experienced the first year. These younger people would hit us, and we would run away to the vice principal's office, but then we started smartening up. We stopped running away and we stood our ground. One time, me and my uncle looked at each other and said, "Hey, we got taught how to fight at the residential school, so why don't we use it?" So, from then on we stood up to them, and they respected us after that.

They started to accept us because we excelled in sports, all the sports we had learned at the residential school: hockey, baseball, volleyball, basketball. We excelled at sports, because at residential school that was your ticket off the grounds. If you were a good hockey player, you got to go out into the community for tournaments, or

even on overnight trips, if they trusted you, because some of the students had tried to run away, and they were kicked off the teams. So we excelled in sports and that's how we became friends with the other students.

The students were surprised that we could play. They thought we were still primitives. They didn't know anything about Indian people. I don't know what their parents were teaching them at that time. I think their parents had told them that we were lazy and we couldn't do anything. We were still savages to them. And this was in the late sixties, early seventies. I couldn't believe it. So we played along. Like the first time I know I pretended to fall on the ice and I pretended I couldn't get up, and told them to come and help me. Eventually we became the first line. To tell you the truth, we outskated them all. And the same thing in softball. My uncle was a good windmill pitcher and I played back catcher, and we used to make signals in Cree. "Hey, don't talk your primitive language," they used to tell us, because they thought we were cheating. Oh, that made them mad, because we won a lot of tournaments. And we did the same thing in hockey. We taught them some Cree, so the other team didn't know what we were saying. That's how we won. And I told them about my grandfather and how he carried a radio pack during the war and the Native languages were the secret code. I told them if it weren't for our Native soldiers, the war would have been lost. Things like that I used to tell them. And still, they would tell us to quit talking our primitive language. Here, our language was being used from generation to generation just like any other language.

One time we were playing in a provincial-level hockey tournament. Our team made it to the finals, and they told us we couldn't play unless we cut our hair. I wore

my hair in a long braid at that time. “Nope, no way,” we told them. “Well you guys can’t play hockey.” So we told them to forget it, we didn’t want to play anyway. I couldn’t believe they tried to make us cut our hair, just to play hockey. And I told them, “I’ve been playing hockey with my hair this long and now you want me to cut it?” And I said, “No, I don’t think so.” And that’s what we experienced. They didn’t allow us to play in the finals, but that year our team still won the championship.

Eventually I finished my Grade 8 and 9. Well, I took a couple of years on Grade 8 anyway, because I failed the first time. It was like everybody expected us to fail right from the start. I didn’t really know how to study, because we weren’t taught that at residential school.

My foster dad used to give us a bit of money, like forty dollars and that was a lot of money back then. Once I got a taste of that, I wanted more. I went back to Little Pine, back to my reserve. I could get money selling firewood to old age pensioners. They would buy my wood for eight bucks a load and I could do about two loads a day. Sixteen bucks was a lot for me, but I wanted more. My foster dad used to tell me, “You have to go to Alberta, Dennis, and work.” A lot of people my age left the reserves to find work back then. I lived on and off between Elrose, Little Pine, and Edmonton in my teens**.** I always had a place to stay.

I started working here and there. Buses used to come to the reserves and pick up work crews. Two Greyhound buses used to pull up and all the Indians, men and women all mixed together, would fill up these buses and away we went! And they used to feed us in those buses—sandwiches, things like that. And I remember we used to go down by Swift Current and camp in the Cypress Hills. That was where my

ancestors used to live on the land, before we were relocated. My first job was at the mill in Smithers, BC. That's where they sent me, but that was too far for me. I didn't want to go, but I was forced to go, so I went there for the winter, but I didn't like it. I felt homesick. I was sent to work on the oil rigs in Wainwright once. I liked that job. This was all through Indian Affairs. They had an employment agency and they sent Indians around on jobs. I worked in the fields hoeing in Lethbridge one summer. We camped out in a big arena full of beds. It was a makeshift dorm that reminded me of residential school. And then the farmers would come in, these were Chinese farmers, and they would take us out to the farms. There was no welfare on the reserves in those days, so we had to work. I liked working.

That was in my teens, and then by about sixteen I went to Alberta to look for a job, because I was kind of getting tired of it. I found this job with the railway. I went to work for the railroad, and I didn't mind it over there. I worked with a lot of immigrants and I never experienced racism there, except from the white bosses, and they used to say, "Oh, here's your first cheque. Are you going to quit now? I heard Indians quit when they get their first cheque." That's what I experienced when I went and picked up my cheque, so when I think about it I kind of laugh.

Well, I didn't quit. I really wanted to tell them off, but I kept my mouth shut. Except sometimes when I was half cut I'd tell them off. That was the only time, because I was a really shy person when I was straight. When I drank I became a different man, I think.

I think I started drinking when I was about fourteen, when I used to go home from Elrose to my mom and dad's. That's where I learned to drink. The first time I

met my dad, he was happy to see me, and he said, “Here son, have a drink” and offered me my first drink. Then, when I would go back to Elrose, I started hanging around with my classmates. We used to have class dances for Hallowe’en and that, and there used to be beer floating around. If a white girl asked me to dance, if I was sober I would say no, but when I was half cut, holy man, I would be dancing the night away. It’s funny how things went like that, holy man. Even when I went to dances back home, I never danced if I was sober. I was a very shy person, like if a girl came and picked me to go dance, I would say no. I wasn’t drinking for depression, nothing like that. It was just to have fun, or so I thought. But I started abusing it more when I was eighteen, when I was old enough to go in the bar.

I used to go into town to party, and that’s where I met my wife. We married too young. I was only eighteen years old. And we started dating for at least a good year anyway, before we started talking about marriage. Once she got pregnant she told me that she was underage, and I had to go to court because I was facing five years for rape at that time. First these social workers came, and then these RCMP officers came knocking at my door. They told me not to leave town and gave me a summons to appear in court. I got scared, so I went and talked to her mom and dad, and arranged to talk to the judge before my court appearance. We all went into the judge’s chambers and I told the judge I was planning on marrying her anyway, but he didn’t believe me, so he had us set a date right there in his chambers: July 20, 1974. This was in April, and he made me come back in August to show him the marriage license. The priest who married us had to appear in court and my parents came, and

then I was released and they told me not to leave Alberta, not to leave town. And I was put on probation.

I didn't want to lose my job, because I had a good job. It was marry her or else I was facing five years in the pen. I had no idea these statutory rape laws existed when I came out from residential school. Even on the farm, they never taught us about these things, nothing about the law. So our marriage was kind of forced, but I was thinking we would get married anyway, down the road, because she was the one I was attracted to, because you know who you're going to marry. You have that feeling and I had that feeling with her and it was mutual. She felt the same way when we started dating. Eventually we would have gotten married, but the law didn't see it like that and the judge forced me to marry her.

So we got married and for the first year everything was good. I bought a house. My son was born and my wife was pregnant with our second child, a daughter. Everything was going good until I got into an accident.

kimiwan: **raindrops**

The Injury &
Post Injury and Rehab

The Injury

So we got married and for the first year everything was good. I bought a house and my son was born, and my wife was pregnant with our daughter. Everything was going good until I got into an accident. I always say "an accident," but I don't know if I ever told you what really happened. I never tell people the truth. I still say it was a car accident.

I was driving my uncle back home to the reserve. He'd been staying with me over there and he needed to get home to Saskatchewan, so I said I'd give him a lift. I left my wife and kid at home because it was too long of a ride for them, especially for the kid. So, I took Friday off and drove my uncle home. I started drinking that morning and never slept at all. I can remember bits and pieces of the night. I used to black out when I drank as a teenager.

I can remember arriving at the reserve and being invited out to a wiener roast beside the Battle River with my old residential school classmates. We hadn't seen one another in a long time. I can remember someone offering me a hotdog. I can remember discussing where we wanted to go. A lot of us were working for the railway then, and we'd just gotten paid. I can remember I took my car to the bar. I used to drive drunk back then. They didn't have the .08 limit in those days. Well, the next thing I knew I woke up in a jail cell with a broken neck. This all happened on June 5, 1976.

I don't know what happened for sure, but what I've pieced together is that the police came into the bar and picked me up for causing a disturbance. At least, that's what they said. This other guy got picked up too, because he was wanted on warrants, the one that was with me. A witness told me that I never did anything, and they just picked me up because I was drunk. I guess there was one cop that was always after the Indians, but I didn't know that. Somewhere between the bar and the detachment, I figure, they must have beaten me up, because when I came to, I found myself like this with a broken neck. How else could I have ended up as a quad? Later, when I talked to people who were there that night they told me that I was walking when I went into the police car. People were scared to say anything. The one witness told me, "Would you tell, if something was pointed at your head?" That's what he told me, and I knew what he meant, because he was scared. I guess he saw me getting beat up by these cops in the back. I had the bruises to prove it. I had bruises all over my face and body from them giving me the boots, I guess. That's how my witness explained it anyway. But half the time I was drunk, blacked out, and I didn't even know that I was getting beat up. I didn't even know that.

They must have stopped the squad car somewhere along the way to beat me up more, because I was making noises, you know, and so they pulled over and told me to get out, so I must have gotten out. I remember running towards a field and bumping into a fence. I must have been trying to get away or something. And then I have a memory of being dragged from the ditch back into the car.

The other guy they picked up said that I was making a racket in the back seat of the car. I don't know what really happened. He told me I would groan every time

the police braked, and I would fall head first towards the front seat and then he would pull me back up. He said he thought something wasn't right. And when we arrived at the detachment I remember trying to get out of the car, but I couldn't move, so they just dragged me along the sidewalk. I remember falling, and I could feel the gravel on my neck, and when I looked down I could see the lines in the cement.

In between my black-outs, I remember little things, like I would come out of it. And then I would black out again. But I knew what was happening. I knew I went into the police car without being forced, but when we arrived at the station I couldn't move anything. And I wanted to say something, but I couldn't, because my head was flopped down with my chin touching my chest, and when I couldn't get up they turned me over and then they dragged me out of the car. That's when I blacked out again. But I remember those lines, those sidewalk lines and the feel of gravel on my neck. I still had feeling in my upper neck.

They threw me in the cell and then I must have blacked out. When I woke up I couldn't move, and I called out to the guards. When I told them I couldn't move my legs, they said, "Oh, Sapp, you're still drunk." I bit into my thumb and I couldn't feel it. I told the guard that I was thirsty and needed water and he rolled me to the sink and over onto my stomach. That's what saved me: being left on my stomach all that time. The pressure emptied my bladder, which was very full from drinking so much. Lots of quads have their urine back up, and it damages their kidneys, but I was lucky. I can remember lying there on the cold cement floor. It was green and blue linoleum. That's how I remember it.

They took me to the hospital and the doctor told me, “You’ve got a broken neck.” I didn’t know how serious that was. I just shrugged it off and I told him, “Well, how come I can’t feel my toes, how come I can’t feel my arms?” “Well, you broke your neck; you broke your spinal cord,” he says. “We’re going to have to transfer you to Saskatoon,” he tells me. So, that was my first experience being a quadriplegic.

Even to this day, I still tell people I was in a car accident. Even today when nurses ask me what happened to me, I still lie about it: “Oh, car accident,” I still say, but I’m going to come to the point eventually that I’m going to say, “Oh, I got beat up by the cops.” I’m still on my healing journey. From the residential school, from losing my culture, things like that.

I was always the tough guy, and I thought if I told my friends, “Oh, I got beat up by the cops,” they would laugh at me. It was silly. It’s silly when I think back to it now. I didn’t want to tell them what really happened, because I didn’t want to ruin my reputation. The thing one Elder told me is that I’m supposed to go back to the detachment and burn sweetgrass in that jail cell, and do a little praying in there. But I don’t know if they will let me or not. Right now I don’t feel like doing that. But when I’m good and ready, when I can face the cops, I want to take an Elder along with me. When I feel ready to face those people.

I want to know what really happened that night. How I ended up as a quad while I was in police custody. We’re supposed to trust them. That’s what I was taught anyway. And here I landed in jail with a broken neck.

My neck is broken at the C 5-6 vertebrae, and so I'm paralyzed from the neck down. I have a little bit of movement in my arms, but no movement in my fingers. My fingers don't function. I don't have my triceps to push, but I've got my biceps, my shoulder muscles. I can feel about three to four inches down my throat, and then I'm paralyzed right above the nipples, I would say. I can't feel the underside of my arms. The top I can feel. I have some wrist movement, but if I turn my fist around, knuckles down on the desk, I can't lift it up. For some reason I can feel my right thumb, but on the left hand side I have no sensation. And on my right hand, I can feel half of my first finger, but on my left I don't feel anything. I need 24-hour care. At night I need to be turned every two hours or I get pressure sores. I've learned to do a lot for myself over the years, but I have to depend on other people for most of my daily functions.

Post Injury and Rehab

I became a quad on June 5, 1976, and my life was forever changed, but for the first few months I had no idea how severe my injury was. I was in the University Hospital in Saskatoon for about seven months. I figured I would eventually be able to walk again. They did an operation on me right away: "Oh, we're going to fix your neck here, and then you'll be fine," they told me. So I had the operation, and they put tongs on my head to stretch my neck. Holy, my neck felt good after that. I started moving my arms, and I thought I must be getting better. They never told me that I was going to be paralyzed, that I was going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. They used to tell me, "Oh, you're making movements." "But I still can't move my legs," I used to tell them. They said I might be able to eventually, you know, that

hope was still there. I wish they had told me right off the bat, and I could have dealt with it right away.

I still thought I might walk, because I started having spasms, and I thought, "Holy man, they were moving on their own, my muscles." I wasn't moving them, and I used to tell the doctors, "Look at them! I'm moving my legs!" The doctors told me that was normal, and they explained to me about spasms. After many months, it finally began to sink in that I would never walk again.

Nobody knew where I was at first. Not even my parents. They were trying to track me down, and finally the hospital called them after a month, and told them what had happened to me. My wife came to my side a few months into it, because up until then she didn't even know where I was. And all this time I figured I was going to be okay. I was in denial for a long time, hoping for a miracle that would allow me to walk again.

It took a long time for it to sink in that my life was going to be different. I got to talk to the doctors, and my wife and I started asking questions about all the things that we were afraid to ask. They showed me the x-ray of my neck, and explained what a spinal cord was, and they showed me where I broke my neck. I had figured when you had a broken neck you would pass away, that's what I figured. I asked them to explain how I could still be here, and they told me, "You're a miracle, you're a miracle, Dennis." I didn't know what they were talking about when they said things like that. My head started spinning and there was the denial, "Oh, holy man it can't be; I can't be like this," and everything changed from there on. I had lost my freedom and independence. We had two kids and that was when I realized that I would never

be able to pick them up and carry them again. I couldn't even look after myself, the way I was. I couldn't even feel what was up ahead. I couldn't even look ahead to what the future would be. It was just one day at a time.

After several months in the hospital, we ran out of money for my wife to stay in town and we couldn't get any help, so she had to go home with the kids. There was a social worker there who we talked to, but it wasn't that helpful because he didn't understand our culture. I guess my wife had talked to him and asked him to tell me that she was leaving with the kids, because she didn't want to tell me herself. I remember the social worker coming into the room and telling me, and that was another letdown right there. I thought that was the last time I would ever see my wife and kids.

After I was discharged, I did end up going to live with my wife and kids again for awhile, but when I moved back to Alberta to live with them, it just wasn't the same. Everything had changed over there. I had to relearn everything: how to sit up, how to eat, things like that, because I could barely move myself. I wasn't the guy that I was supposed to be.

My wife had to find a job, so she went to work as a waitress. That was hard for me. I didn't like my wife working, because I was supposed to be the one providing for the family. One time when she came home, she told me about her boss trying to persuade her to go to bed with him. We call it sexual harassment today, but back then there were no such laws, nothing like that, no.

My wife used to go out and leave me with the kids, and they would start crying, but I couldn't do anything about it. My son would be running all over the

place. I used to call her at the bar where she worked and tell her to come home. Sometimes her mom used to come to the house, and I didn't like the way she treated me, just like a little kid, you know, all day long.

I didn't have any other support, except for this one white guy. He owned a drugstore, and he used to come and visit me, because he was my pharmacist. He explained to me about bladder infections, because when you're a quad you can get those more easily, because of the catheter. There was nobody else to help my wife, so some days, if this guy hadn't come to wake me up and lift me into my wheelchair, I would have been stuck in bed all day.

It wasn't the same with my old work friends. I wasn't the same guy as when I was working. I used to be the guy that people looked up to and, now that I was in a wheelchair, they treated me like a little kid. The guys didn't talk to me the right way, the way they used to. We couldn't wrestle each other, things like that. They were afraid to touch me, because they thought they might hurt me.

When I ended up back in the hospital in Edmonton with a bladder infection, I told my wife that I didn't think I could go back to live with them after that. She said they'd come and get me, but, I said, "No, I can't. I'm going back to Saskatchewan. If you come you do, if you don't you don't." I had to go back there to start over, to find life again. There were no marriage counsellors back then, so we didn't have anyone to talk to, to work things out, and she stayed in Alberta with the kids. We'd married so young. I didn't even know what marriage was. My wife was white, and never went to residential school. I don't know if she really understood how my time at residential school was affecting me, affecting my ability to be a husband, to be a parent.

I think my home was really in Saskatchewan, because I was just over in Alberta for work. I didn't have the back-up I needed there. It wasn't really my place, and there was nobody to come and help me. So they transferred me to the University Hospital, and I moved back to Saskatchewan. I spent some time living back on the reserve with family, and then I moved to Saskatoon and I've been here ever since.

At first I stayed in a private care home with eight other people. It became my hiding place. That's where I started my hiding, my depression. I never went out. I did nothing all day but mope around. I didn't communicate with anybody. I didn't want to see my extended family. I told my grandfather not to bother coming to visit me. I didn't want to show myself to people, because I was ashamed to be like that. I was proud. Cree people are proud people. I was such a pretender in those days. I just went through the motions of living. I never let on how low I was really feeling. If people asked me how I was doing, I would tell them I was doing fine, but I was so depressed.

There were no other wheelchairs around that were Native. There were hardly any people in wheelchairs that had the same injury as me, to learn from. I guess the depression kind of hit me then. I had lost my wife. I had lost my family. There was nobody to love me. All kinds of things went through my head. All kinds of bad things, I would say. I cursed God, "Why God? Why are you doing this to me?" I went into a tailspin of no good and the depression hit me all at once. I sunk so low that I started thinking, "Holy man, what's the use of living?"

I was on Valium. I used to take a big dose of Valium three times a day, and I had stashed away a whole bunch. One night I just took the whole kit and caboodle.

Now I can call it a suicide attempt, but I didn't see it that way then. I couldn't deal with everything I had lost, and I just wanted the pain to go away.

My plan was to take all the pills late at night, because I figured there wouldn't be anybody around for awhile after they turned me at midnight. I guess my roommate heard me start to vomit, and he called out to me. I couldn't wake up and I didn't answer, so he knew there was something wrong. He called the care home staff and they found me unconscious and called an ambulance. They tried to wake me up, but I had gone into a coma. Early the next morning I woke up at the Royal University Hospital with a tube in my stomach. I was lucky they found me.

There were hardly any people in wheelchairs back then, and very few counsellors for us, but I did have one counsellor. He was a guy from the Canadian Paraplegic Association named Don Morningchild. I met him when I was in the hospital in Saskatoon. He was a Native guy from the Water Hen Reserve near Meadow Lake. The hospital had called him. "They told me you were here having difficulties," he said, and he told me he was a volunteer with CPA. I had never heard of the Canadian Paraplegic Association before that. Don spoke Cree, so we could talk in our own language. He taught me all the things he knew about the traditional ways, because he never went to residential school. He had been in a car accident and was a paraplegic. He took me home one time and he had his girlfriend there and he had a daughter, too. I thought, "Holy man, this guy must be real." We became good friends till the day he died. I respected him a lot for what he did for me. He was proud. And me, I was trying to hide from my girlfriends, but when I went to his place it made me

look wider, “Oh, I you mean I can still get a girlfriend?” I asked him, because I thought that part of my life was over.

Through Don I met Georgina Morin. She was a Cree woman from Sandy Lake. She really helped me, too. She talked about the woman’s point of view, because she was something like me, Georgina. She had received a gunshot wound to the neck and was paralyzed. She was a strong woman, you know, and I really respected her. She had a kid, she had boyfriends, and I wasn’t even considering things like that. I was hiding from women. But eventually, like I always say, you always come down to earth. You were made to have a partner. I always say that, because that’s why women and men were made. So I kind of picked up little things here and there about courage from Don and Georgina.

After my suicide attempt, my family started coming around, like my brothers. They hadn’t been visiting me, because I told them not to come around. My brother Bill started visiting me. He used to come and push me around, to start meeting people and things like that. My extended family started coming around.

My family was still in denial about my injury. Even to this day, one of my brothers is still in denial that I’m like this. Still to this day he comes to see me, and he goes on and on about the past: “We used to…we used to…” he says, always talking about the past: “Oh Dennis, we were strong.” I was trying to look into the future for myself, but it was kind of hard.

There was another guy with a spinal cord injury at the private care home who kind of made me see the brighter side of things. He had only been in a wheelchair for two years when I met him, but he was already taking schooling. He was trying to

finish high school. He told me I should go back to school, but at that time I was still trying to come to terms with my disability. He was the same as me, a quad at C 5-6, and he could drive. He had a car, and the people that were taking care of us used to put him in his car, and he would *drive away!* That used to amaze me, but I never thought of me doing things like that, because I was still dealing with the loss of my marriage and my kids. I worried so much about my kids. At least the house was paid for, so they were set up, and I was given compensation, so half the money went to her and half went to me, till the kids were eighteen. But, holy man, I was so down. My life was ruined. My self-esteem was broken, and I couldn't see myself ever working again. I used to dream about being the way I was, walking again, and then I'd wake up and see myself this way.

My friend Don used to come and visit me. He pepped me up. I was lucky to have met him. He used to roll himself from Avenue X to my place, and that was quite a long way to wheel. It must have been at least a good thirty blocks. He lived in a house at 20th and Avenue X. I couldn't see myself ever living like him, because he was a paraplegic, paralyzed from the waist down, so he had the use of his arms, so he could do more things for himself. He taught me a lot and he gave me some good advice. He told me about this life skills program at the Sherbrooke nursing home, so I started going to the day program there, all day from 9 o'clock till about 3 o'clock. I did that every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

It was a day centre for people who were disabled. That's when I started writing with my mouth. I used to only mark with an "X". I kept my writing and my drawings and I felt proud of them. When I started doing things for myself, I started

liking myself. My self-esteem was going back up. I started doing exercises. I used to do pulleys, and I'd do an extra one. I'd start with five pounds weights. To me that was lots. I'd do ten, and the next day I would do eleven, you know, and the following day twelve, things like that. Doing these things made me feel successful. I started finding my self-esteem. It helped to see what other disabled people were doing, what other quads were doing, things like that.

I got to mingle with people, and they had a life skills program. Sometimes they would take us out to bingos or to shows. I used to enjoy going to the Forestry Farm Zoo. It really helped me to get out from my hiding place, because I was getting more depressed and I had to do something.

That program lasted about six months. I got to meet other people with disabilities. I found out about disabilities I didn't even know existed, like cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis, and I met people who were blind. It really opened me up to what I could expect in my life, in my lifetime. I became more aware of my disability. I started to learn more about it, how to cope with it, and how other people dealt with their disabilities. I wanted to do more for myself, to learn more about myself and my disability, because I didn't know I had a disability, being a quadriplegic and that. I had never thought of it as being disabled all that time.

I think what changed for me was my future outlook: "This is the way I'm going to live, in a wheelchair, without walking, so I have to try and cope with that right away." And there were other people there that were more disabled than me. Some of them could just move their heads, and they couldn't move their arms at all, and I was thinking, "Oh geez, I'm lucky. I'm thankful that I can use my arms."

Sometimes I would look at this blind guy, and he was determined to live as normal a life as he could, and I would shut my eyes, holy man, and try to imagine losing my eyesight, and I would thank the Creator that I'm not blind. I started appreciating what I had. I had my mind, my mind was functioning well, things like that. And some of them had degenerative conditions, like my friend with multiple sclerosis. He gave himself about two years, and then he said he'd start going downhill after that. He became one of my best friends this guy. His name was Ron Parisien. It was my first time meeting a guy that was blind. He didn't feel comfortable going out on his own either. We'd go out to restaurants and he'd push me and I used to be his eyes. That's how we helped each other. His buddies used to come over, and my buddies, and we'd all mingle. Ron was white, and he used to joke around with me, "When are we going to become blood brothers, Dennis?" He was living as normal a life as he could, although he had MS and he knew he was dying. "Don't pity me, Dennis," he used to tell me. He was blind and bedridden, and he never knew if he was going to make it one more day. We were friends right up to the end. I looked up to him and he inspired me.

And after that life skills program ended, some of us continued to get together, and we'd go out to restaurants or bars and things like that. Some of us would get together as a little club to go out. I didn't feel so alone, and I liked going out when there were other people with disabilities there.

One day my *mosôm* came to visit me. That was the grandfather who took care of me when I was little. He had never visited me before. I was lying down and he came by, and he was talking to me about the past, and all that time I was hiding under

the covers with my eyes closed. I didn't want to look at him because it hurt me, in a way, to look at people, to look at my family, because I must have been ashamed or something. Anyway, that triggered me off and I didn't know what the heck he was doing. Here, he had taken off his wooden leg, pulled my blanket down to my waist, and he was waving his stump in front of my face. He told me, "Look what I went through, Dennis," but he didn't go into the details of what happened. He just showed me. Right in front of my face, and he even touched my nose. Years later I found out that he had been run over by a guy who accused my grandfather of sleeping with his wife. The two of them got boozed up, started arguing, and ended up wrestling out in the snow in the middle of January in sub zero weather. He knocked my grandfather out cold and then hopped in his car and ran over his legs and left him for dead. My grandfather came to out in the field and crawled for three miles with a crushed leg. He had become quite skilled at crawling on his arms when he was a sniper on the front lines, and that's what saved him. That and the cold weather, that stopped his bleeding, or else he would have bled to death for sure. I heard that this guy went on to lose his own two legs, so I guess what goes around comes around. Anyway, up until that point I had never thought of my grandfather as someone with a disability.

"What are you still doing in bed?" he asked me, and it reminded me of our times together before I went to residential school, when he used to call me by my nickname, *wâkâyôsis*, which means Little Bear. He would say, "Come on, *wâkâyôsis*, get up, we're going to go check the snares," and this was at five or six o'clock in the morning. He used to smudge himself before I even got up, and he would have breakfast all ready. He was ready to go. He had my gunny sack packed and ready to

go, and he used to tell me, "You know, Dennis, you can sleep all you want when you're dead." And so I started thinking about that. And I remembered my *mosôm*'s way of teaching me. His discipline. And I started disciplining myself, even though I was disabled. I started looking ahead for the betterment of Dennis.

And then my *mosôm* prayed for me, he touched my head and he prayed for me that morning, that morning when he came there. It was a prayer he sang in Cree when he did ceremonies. And when he touched my forehead I could feel his hand really warm. My mom used to say that fire came out from his hands when he was healing people. Well, to me it felt like intense heat, and all of a sudden, boy, holy, my way of thinking changed. You know, that woke me up, that really woke me up. I felt really strange, like, "Hey, at least I'm alive," I was thinking, the way he was talking to me. It was just the wake up call that I needed.

It wasn't God who did this to me. My negativity up and left. After two years of depression, I started thinking positive. "At least you're alive. You're alive, Dennis. You've got a chance. You came up and your neck was broken," he told me, and he was talking in Cree all this time. All of a sudden, boy, holy man, everything cleared up that day. That's when I started looking towards the future for myself, like not always focusing on my wife leaving me. Things changed after that. I didn't even look at things like that, all the negatives. "Oh, that's right, he's right, I'm alive, eh!" I was happy to be alive, and we started praying together in that room, and I started praying, to ask forgiveness. And I stopped my, "Oh God, why me?" thinking. That's what people always say when they get sick. They blame God right way, but they don't look

at the evil side. But my *mosôm* told me, “No, don’t even look back there, that way,” he says**, “***ôtê nîkân;* Think in front. Look to the future”.

And I always told him I wanted to go and kill those cops that did this to me, and I had revenge on my mind. “No, don’t even think like that,” he used to tell me. “What goes around comes around,” he used to always tell me. And I heard that, in the end, what went around did come around for that cop who had hurt so many Aboriginal people over the years, the one who beat me up.

“Think about your fellow humans,” he says, “Forgive them, always forgive people,” he says. “That’s the most important thing in life, that you forgive.” Some people don’t do that; they don’t forgive. They would rather kill or maim somebody. Things like that were going through my mind all that time, but something shifted for me that day. My feelings changed, my way of thinking changed that day. I started feeling happy. When I got up I prayed. He had taught me all these things when I was a child, but I had forgotten them. By then I had forgotten all about my traditional spirituality. I had forgotten who my *mosôm* was, because he was a respected Elder. He had earned that. When I went to that residential school we were brainwashed into becoming Roman Catholics, and we were taught to pray differently, and we were taught to forget our traditional spirituality, our culture, and our language.

I started enjoying life after that. Everything wasn’t perfect, but I began to adapt to the changes in my life after that day he healed me. He told me to stop looking in the past and to try and look toward the future. He never cried. He never pitied me, never. That’s what I liked about him. Some people in my family used to

come and pity me, and I didn't really like that, because the way I took it I was being babied.

When he uncovered me, that's when I started looking at things differently, but, there was still that side of me yet when I was walking, that was still inside of me. After that I started getting out socially, but the thing about it is I went to the wrong places. I started going out drinking at the bar, coming home drunk, you know, things like that again. And when I was drinking at that time, like the first few years, that really got me into it. My friend used to come and pick me up, and we would sit up all night drinking. I thought I was having fun back then. I was trying to get back to the way I had been when I was walking and partying with my friends.

So I started going out more and I started going back to my reserve more often. When I'd go back to the reserve to watch tournaments, I felt more comfortable if there was another wheelchair there. Then I would get out of the car and watch the game. Otherwise I felt scared. I don't know why. I would hide from my old friends. And I'd see my old girlfriends, and I'd worry about what they might be thinking about me, seeing me in a wheelchair. The only time I was strong enough to come out was when I was half cut. It kind of reminded me of the old days when, if I wanted to dance, I had to be half cut.

People would tell me, "Why don't you go back to your culture?" but I didn't even know what they meant. I had to relearn my own culture. The Roman Catholic influence was still so strong. They told us our culture was savage, and it still scared me to think we might be praying to Satan, because that's what they taught us in residential school. Eventually I started going to traditional ceremonies, but sometimes

I would need to be half cut to go. My brothers used to come and pick me up, and they would take me down to feasts and that. That was just the beginning of my healing journey. When I really got into my traditional spirituality was when my brother Bill was passed down the traditional knowledge by my *mosôm*. Before my *mosôm* died he passed on all his traditional knowledge to my brother Bill, the one that was at residential school with me. Bill became an Elder like my *mosôm*. He was given the Sundance, and he learned how to hold a sweat lodge ceremony. My *mosôm* passed down all the songs of our ancestors, because the songs stay in a family and are passed down. And he passed down the pipe and the eagle whistle.

Eventually I started going back to Sundances, things like that, but I wasn't really into it. It took me a long time to go to a Sundance, and even then I felt like an outsider in my own culture. And it was hard for me to start understanding things, where I was at, but my *mosôm* understood. He knew how hard it was for me, and that it would take time to relearn those things. I had forgotten all the things he had taught me as a boy, but they were still inside of me. I just had to find Dennis again.

sâkâstêw: sunrise

Education, Life Today,
and Further Reflections

Education

In the late eighties and early nineties, I started getting involved with the Canadian Paraplegic Association. They invited me to join, and I volunteered with their peer counselling service. I would get referrals from them, and I'd go to the hospital and talk to people with new spinal cord injuries. That's where I started on my path of becoming a counsellor, but I didn't feel that good, because I didn't have my education. I used to be ashamed about that, and when people asked me what Grade I had completed, I used to lie to them. I used to pretend, and I didn't like that about myself, because the truth was I had dropped out in Grade 8, to go looking for work.

When I moved to the care home I live at now, there was a resident there who was taking his adult upgrading at Kelsey, the local community college. He kept encouraging me to go back to school and he told me to apply for funding from the CPA. He said they'd help me out. I used to laugh at him. "Me, go to school?!" I figured I was too old. I was 39 years old already. I teased him about being 18 years old in Grade 8, because even that seemed old to me, because you're supposed to be in Grade 12 by that age.

Finally I decided, "Why not? I'll give it a try. I'll go back," and I went and applied. I was on the waiting list for a couple of months and then, sure enough, I got in. So I started going to the Adult Basic Education program at Kelsey, with funding from the CPA.

I liked telling people that I was in school; it made me feel good about myself, but I still had an alcohol problem. Alcohol and school didn't mix. I used to tag along with the other students. We'd go out drinking at the bar across the road, and then I'd go to class the next day with a hangover. In 1995, everything changed for me, because I was going to be kicked out of school. They were going to let me go because I had poor attendance. My marks weren't great, but I was passing, so one of the counsellors there took me aside and we talked for a long time. He said he believed in me, and told me I had what it took to do well in school. He said that if I finished the program, I could be a really good role model for other Native people with spinal cord injuries. That I could be the first one. He gave me a really good pep talk. So that kind of clicked, and I started really going after my education in 1995, and I passed my Grade 8.

After that, I started taking my life seriously. "This is for real," I realized. All through my lifetime I had had my physical strength to back me up. I was strong when I was walking, but now that I had a spinal cord injury, I had nothing to back me up. I couldn't do physical labour anymore. Finally I realized that, if I was going to find work, I needed my education, and once I got my education a lot of options started popping up.

I started enjoying school. I stopped drinking with the other students. Sometimes I would go to the bar with them, but I wouldn't drink. I would drink tomato juice or an orange pop, something like that, so they started calling me "Sodapop Kid." "Come on, Sodapop Kid," they'd say. That was my nickname, because I didn't drink and that, but I used to go out with them.

The teachers at Kelsey found me a tutor, a really nice woman. She was a retired school teacher, and she helped me along. I started to excel in school. Before, when I used to come home to do my homework, I would turn on the television, but after that I decided to have the cable shut off, and eventually I sold my television. There were so many distractions at the care home with ten people living together. Somebody was always ringing the buzzer to call for help, and I'd take off just to get away from all the noise. So, I started staying at school later to do my homework. I started to take along a bag lunch, and I even ate supper at school some days. And I started doing my homework on Saturdays and Sundays, and in the evenings. My tutor used to stay with me. Sure enough, everything paid off in the end. In 1995, I started my Grade 9 and 10. In 1996, I started my Grade 11 and 12, and in the fall of 1996-97, I passed my Grade 12, with the highest percentage in my whole class. I had 80% attendance, and my final mark for Grade 12 was 92%.

So, I went back to my counsellor. "Okay Dennis, what do you have in mind?" he asked me. "Do you want to continue your education? You've got good marks here," he told me, "so you can apply to university," and this was a university for Native people. At that time it was called the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), but now it's called the First Nations University of Canada. That kind of surprised me, because I had never imagined finishing high school, let alone going to university.

I took the Social Work program there. I just wanted to get a degree in something. I wasn't very good at math, so I couldn't see myself going into accounting. I used to read about the social work program in the calendar, and I'd say

to myself, “Hey, this is what I need.” It was the best fit for me. There is a real need for social workers to work on the reserves, but I can’t say I was thinking about that when I applied to the program. I had had a really positive experience with one of the social workers at the Royal University Hospital. I felt safe talking to her about things that were really hard to talk about. She helped me open up. I wanted to be able to help people like that. Another social worker who helped me was my counsellor at school. He had taken that program, and he told me they needed more male social workers.

I used to pop in to see my counsellor, even after I left Kelsey, because he was my role model, I guess, at that time. He would give me good pep talks: “Oh Dennis, you’re doing good, I heard you’re doing good.” I would always thank him for all his help. I tried my best, my very best, and I had the support I needed. My tutor came with me to classes, to write notes for me. She was there all along, my tutor.

I really enjoyed going back to school. It was so great to be in a university with so many other Native people. There were always people around to talk to. Other students would ask me for help and advice. There were really good Aboriginal teachers there and we were studying our own culture. We had some other good teachers too. It was so different from my experience at residential school. The way they taught us at the residential school was, holy man, too mind bungling for me.

I did a lot of presentations instead of mid-terms. I excelled in doing presentations and essays. I got really good marks on them. Why I excelled, I figured, was because I had my life. I talked about my life. I told the students about my *mosôm*, about my time at residential school, about my marriage and my kids. I would talk about disabilities all the time in these courses I was in. And when I did those

presentations, everything was silent. It kind of scared me. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. It was totally silent, and when I talked, everybody was looking right at me the whole time. That was a great accomplishment in my life, for me to speak in front of so many people, because growing up I was shy, and I never thought I would ever do things like that.

When we did presentations everybody wanted to grab me to be in their group, because they knew I would do a good job. It reminded me of my days in Elrose, playing sports with my uncle, when they would come and pick us up to go play hockey or baseball or basketball. It felt good. I was teaching them something and they respected me. They would drive 12 or 14 miles to come and get us and take us to tournaments, me and my uncle, because they knew that we were good players. When I look back on my schooling, it was a lot like that, the way it made me feel inside. It really lifted me up when the students would come and ask me to work with them. Because I was disabled, I figured nobody would care. That's the way I was still thinking, in a way, so I was surprised when they started asking me to help them out. Many students told me that I inspired them. They had the use of both their arms and legs, and they would look at me and see what I was accomplishing even though I had a disability, and that made them stop complaining or making excuses.

At university I relearned my culture, because that's what they were teaching us. Not like at the residential school, where it was only the Roman Catholic teachings, things like Jesus being crucified, things like that. When I think back now, we were praying to statues. The university had Elders teaching us our culture back. That's where I started relearning the traditional protocols, from the Elders. It was just like

the way my *mosôm* had taught me when I was young, and I did really well because I could speak Cree, and I knew these things from before. It started clicking, my culture, and that's where I really started on my healing journey. That was where I began to discover more about myself, about who Dennis was, because I had never found who Dennis was. That's where I started respecting people, because I was still kind of mad at the world, and mad at myself.

One of our courses was called Cultural Camp, and we'd go out to the Whitecap Reserve or to the Cypress Hills, and live together for 14 days and learn the traditional ways from the Elders. I used to always say to them, "Geez, you act and sound just like my *mosôm*, I used to tell them. In some ways it was different than the way my *mosôm* would have taught me. It was more academic, because the Elders had to go through a certain protocol, because it was through the University of Regina.

Our courses combined the traditional spiritual methods with Western counselling approaches. We learned about the traditional sharing circle as well as one-to-one counselling. In our classes at the First Nations University we used to talk about our problems. There were times in my life when there was nobody to talk to, especially when I was feeling suicidal. There were things inside of me that I really needed to get out, and I didn't know people cared enough to realize who I was on the inside. I didn't know how to express my feelings. That's why I was suicidal then.

There were 50-60 students in each class, and we used to take turns sharing about how we were doing, things like that, and I used to bring out all my problems at that time. When I had suicidal thoughts, they used to come out, and I started showing myself from the inside. Now I can talk about these things. And I can talk about the

things that I went through in the residential school. That's why I was suicidal. That's why I figure so many suicides are happening. They're pretenders and they don't share what's really going on, but once you go inside of them, it will come out. Some of them commit suicide because they don't know how to deal with what happened in their life. Whereas me, I can talk about it now.

See, if they had taught like that in residential school, boy, none of our Aboriginal people would be in jails, none of them. They would be disciplined. But most of them don't go back to their culture and spirituality because of what they were taught in the residential school about Native spirituality. They were told it was a sin, so they're afraid they'll go to hell. Sometimes that's what I think, when I think about the high rate of suicide on reserves. The effects of the residential schools run all through the families. It reminds me of what my *mosôm* used to tell me: "Dennis, you're going to be okay, but you've got to watch your sons and daughters. Maybe it won't be them, but their sons and daughters." Sure enough that's what's happening on reserves right now. Suicides are being committed because nobody talks to the youth. There are so many dysfunctional families.

I got a Bachelor of Social Work degree in 2002. Holy man, that felt good! That really boosted my self-esteem. Then I went back to my counsellor there upstairs. I went to talk to him, and he told me, with some extra courses I could get my Bachelor of Arts in Indian Studies, and I got that in 2003. So, I got two degrees from there, because I excelled in my own culture and I could speak Cree.

After that I took a year off and volunteered my services wherever they were needed. I worked with a disability group called Saskatchewan First Nations Network

on Disabilities. It's part of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN). I've been a board member with them for ten years. I belong to the Health and Social Development Committee. I'm a spokesperson on disabilities and I speak about our issues at our table at the Legislative Assembly. That's the meeting of all 73 Chiefs of the Treaty Indian bands in Saskatchewan. No other disability group in Canada has achieved that yet. It's a real honour for us to accomplish that.

I decided to apply to the Master's of Social Work program at the First Nations University of Canada and I was interviewed by ten people from the school. I didn't know if I could get into that, but I thought I'd give it a try, and sure enough I got in. We had a full year of classes and then I completed a four-month practicum.

It was hard to find a practicum placement. It had to be with a Master's level counsellor. I went to all these places, but I figure once they saw that I was disabled, they said they weren't set up for disabilities. Finally, I found a placement at the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies. This was an institute for Aboriginal people that was run by educated Aboriginal people, and I fit right in there. It was similar to First Nations University in that they had Elders at the school.

I used to give talks to the students and teachers, and I offered counselling in my office there. Most of these students had been affected in one way or another by the residential schools. Either they had family members that were in residential school, or they themselves were in residential school. It awed me how far the effects went, all the way to their kids' kids. I started this sharing circle and I told them to come and see me, whoever wanted to sit down in my sharing circle, my talking circle. We met in the board room at SIIT after school.

While I was at SIIT, I did a small research project on disabilities at their various campuses, like in North Battleford, Lloydminster, and Regina. I interviewed students who identified themselves as having a disability and I encountered about 60 students with various types of disabilities. Many of them said they felt comfortable talking to me because I also had a disability, so I knew what it was like to feel different.

My thesis topic comes out of my own experience of rediscovering my culture and spirituality, and finding what was taken away from me at residential school. I visited reserves and interviewed Elders about their experiences in residential school. I held focus groups on the reserve, and residential school survivors talked about how attending the schools has affected their lives.

There was one guy who came to my focus group. I'll always remember this guy. I decided to let him attend the group, even though he had been drinking, because I figured that was the only way he could be there and express himself. Otherwise he wouldn't have come. He never made any trouble. It wasn't the bottle talking, I told him, it was his voice we were hearing. I told him how I used to need to be half cut to sing, or to dance with a woman. I told him I used to need to be half cut in order to be brave, so I knew what that was like.

I completed my Master's thesis in the fall of 2006, and I figured that was the ultimate, getting my Master's degree, because I had fulfilled my goal, but I have to keep looking towards the future for myself. I always have to focus on my next goal. The next hurdle I might go after is my PhD. For me, doing a PhD is like setting out to scale a mountain. If I can reach that peak I'll have accomplished all that I've set out

to do. Up until now, all my other challenges have been like little hills compared to that. I'm looking into doing that and I'm interested in developing a disability studies curriculum from an Aboriginal perspective. There aren't many programs in Canada, especially from an Aboriginal perspective. We'd like students to be taught about disabilities in the school system. I'd do it in my own traditional Cree way and involve the Elders.

I meet people with disabilities who sit around all day playing video games, holy man, and they're 23 or 24 years old, and I always say to them, "You need your education." I've been there. After ten years in a wheelchair nobody was going to listen to me. I had no back-up. So my education is my back-up. With my education, I can start earning money, instead of stealing it.

Returning to school helped me so much. That was where I started rediscovering my spirituality. That was where I found myself. I started learning my culture. I found what was missing, and I realized, "Hey, this is it. This is the real McCoy, the real thing. This is me." That Roman Catholic stuff wasn't me, because it was so different, so very different. And to this day, I'm still learning, relearning, all that I missed.

Life Today and Further Reflections

Cree people are proud people. Whenever there was a wounded warrior, if he was shot or wounded, he would go off by himself to die, because he was too proud to look at his family the way he was, because he couldn't take care of his family anymore. I think that as an Aboriginal person I've dealt with my disability differently than a white person would. I think I've experienced more denial and depression. The

residential school experience did a lot of damage, and I think that's what led to my negativity.

You have to remember how I was treated at residential school. See, that created a big conflict in my life. That's why you see so much violence and abuse today, and so many Aboriginal people in jail. That's where I probably would've ended up, if I was still walking today. That's why I always say I'm happy being disabled. I'm trying to help people now, instead of maiming or killing them. We've all been affected by the residential school experience. When I talk to groups of kids, I always ask them, "Do you know what a residential school is? Did someone in your family go to residential school?" And most of them put up their hands. They all have family members who went through the residential school system and the negative effects run right through the generations.

I went back to the residential school several years ago with my brothers. This was part of my healing journey, to go back there, to find some closure. Walking around the grounds brought up so many memories. I could see the faces, and my imagination got the better of me. We spent the day there, and in the afternoon I went off to a quiet place and had a big cry. All those years I had held in those tears, because I never wanted the nuns to see me cry, because that's what they wanted, I always told myself. We wandered around and saw the old classrooms, and where the rink was, and the baseball field. The corrals were still there, but they were old. The barn looked weathered and beaten. We saw the little garage where we used to have our fights, and all the memories came back to me. "See, over there, that's the place where I fell through the ice one time", I told my brothers. And as I looked around the

grounds, I noticed that the fence had been torn down. The fence wasn't there anymore, but you could still tell where it had been.

I think that I experience a double whammy being an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia. Now, I don't know how a white person deals with it, because I can't speak for a white person, but my sense is that they deal with it right away, or at least sooner. I think it takes longer for an Aboriginal person to come out of it, whereas, I notice when white people become disabled, they don't go through what I went through. I notice these white people around here deal with their physical disabilities right away. They go back to school right away. At least some of them do. Not all of them, because some are still in denial about their disabilities. Most of them just come out of it, and they start living their lives and changing their lives for the better, whereas me, as an Aboriginal person, it took me a long time to get to where I am now.

I have to take things in stride in a white community. I was taught differently in the white world. In order to survive I had to learn their language and adjust to their culture. I've had to learn to live in two worlds, but it works. The white community is so different from ours. You would know what I mean if you came and lived on a reserve. You would find a different way of living. You don't see many white people living on reserves.

There's one guy with blond hair and blue eyes who lives on our reserve because he married into a Native family. When I see him, and I ask him how he's doing, he always jokes around with me, "Ah, these Indians are still trying to kill me, to scalp me for my blond hair." He even speaks Cree. He's not an outsider anymore,

but it's taken him a lifetime to learn our traditions. The thing is, it was his choice. He wasn't forced, like what they did to us. That's why so many of us don't want to learn the white system. We didn't have a choice.

There's a white woman I know who married into a Native family**.** She's a wannabe-- that's what we call them-- but she earned it. She has lived in our culture most of her life, because she married an Aboriginal man and adapted to our ways. I think it can work for a white person to come into our culture, to learn our culture, but not to force them like what they did to us. See, it can work out either way, but for us it was forced. That's why we don't want to learn it. And me, I've spent half my life trying to find Dennis again, the Dennis who was taken away from me.

Before the residential schools, you learned the right way to go about things. As soon as you were born, you learned through your grandfather. I didn't realize it at the time, but when I was small I was already learning to be an Elder's helper, to be an *oskâpêwis*. From the time I was only three or four years old, I knew what to do without being told. Once my *mosôm* started praying, I knew to cut off the rabbit's ear, to give something back to Mother Earth, to be thankful. Nothing was wasted. I knew to build the fire, to bring out the sweetgrass. It was just *in* me, it wasn't something I had to be told. It was unspoken. I remember my *mosôm* used to burn sweetgrass and pray as soon as he woke up. I used to get up right away when he did that, because I knew it was time to get up to pray with him. I wasn't told, "Hey Dennis, get up now. We're going to pray." I knew my place already, so I knew just what to do. Every day was a ceremony to us. Every day was sacred, because you were

given life again. You got to see another day. Even to this day I pray and give thanks each day. And I try to give something back.

The healing in my life didn't really happen the way I thought it would. For a long time, I hoped for a miracle that would allow me to walk again, but now I realize that healing, for me, meant living a long life. It meant finding the way to heal myself. It meant giving something back.

My *mosôm* used to tell me, "You're going to live long, Dennis." That day in my bed, when my *mosôm* pulled off his wooden leg and waved his stump in my face, he said, "I can heal you." He did heal me. I think, at that time, healing for me was that I was going to live a long life, and sure enough, I've been living as a quadriplegic for over 30 years now. I became like this June 5, 1976. The estimated lifespan for a quadriplegic is 10-15 years after your injury. Here I am, and I've still got my health, although I was diagnosed with diabetes in 2004. I'm still fighting that, but I choose to see it as one more obstacle for me to overcome. I have to take really good care of myself now. I'm lucky I don't have pressure sores or any problems like that. And I had to have surgery this past summer and I was almost a goner, but I survived.

When I had the surgery I had a close brush with death. I would have been dead, but I prayed so hard that I was listened to. Now I know it works. I know my culture works. I've got the proof. I think it was a bear that kept me alive. It was my guardian angel. They took me down to ICU, and something was flying all around me. At first I thought it was a bad demon. When it flew across my body, I could feel the heat. It reminded me of the heat in my grandfather's hands when he healed me, the day I woke up, that's the way I felt after that surgery. I blacked out in the afternoon

and I never regained consciousness till early the next morning. They didn't think I was going to make it. They called my family. My whole family was standing around me. Everybody thought I was going to die, because I had blood poisoning. My legs started going, my heart started pumping really fast, so they sedated me. One of my brothers stayed by my side the whole night. He told me that I was talking in Cree all night saying there was something flying all around me. He said he couldn't see anything. My mom told me that it must have been my guardian angel taking care of me. Well, the way I took it is it brought me back to life. I'm alive! I cheated death. That's what the white people say. I think I was given another chance here. It wasn't my time to go, because it never hit my kidneys, it never hit my lungs, that blood poisoning. Eight out of ten people pass away when they get that, that's what the doctor told me. He was surprised I made it, and me being a quad like this, the risk is even higher, but I made it, because I prayed before I blacked out. I prayed for myself, and I said in Cree, "I'll work for you." I told the Creator, "I'll work for you, if I come back." So now I'm looking at things differently, like I said, my job is not finished. I have to do what the Creator wants me to do.

After that experience my mom told me she would go to a feast for me. She told me which Elder to talk to and she went for me, because I couldn't travel after the operation. While I was recovering she did the rituals for me. She went into the sweats for me. And the sweats, those are powerful ceremonies for us. If somebody's sick, that's where they go. My mom went in for me, and I appreciate her for that.

I think I'm supposed to go back to my reserve, because right now it's in turmoil. There are drugs and alcohol, things like that, and the younger people are

getting affected. There are so many suicides. They want me to go back and be a role model. I'm supposed to be a role model, because of what I went through in life, and then getting a disability, and going back to school and getting my Master's. I want to go home and work for my community of Little Pine. I wouldn't mind teaching the students there, helping them to understand their culture, teaching them the Cree language.

There are Aboriginal children and youth today who are lost to substance abuse, violence and suicide. They're lost because they don't know who they are, and they don't know their place. They don't know their Cree language, so they don't even know who they are. They live in the white society, so they figure they're white, because they never grew up speaking their language. These are the kids I want to help. I want to give back to the children and youth, especially the ones living on reserve.

I'm trying to set up a homecare program on my reserve, so I can go back to my reserve and live in my own place without worrying about getting the care I need. I don't want my family to look after me. They did their job already. That's why I'm at this place here right now. This is a good place, next to home, I always say. I wouldn't mind setting up a place like this on my reserve. And we need more care homes for Aboriginal people here in the city, too. I was involved in setting up a home here in town for Aboriginal people with brain injuries, and there are Aboriginal staff working there. I'm on the hiring committee here at this care home, and we're hiring Aboriginal people to work with the residents. Still, I'd like to be able to move back home to my reserve, because my work isn't done.

My *mosôm* told me I'm supposed to give something back-- to the community, to the youth. And I'm supposed to take what happened in my life, and go and talk about it. My *mosôm* used to tell me, "You're going to be talking in front of a lot of people -- hundreds," he used to tell me, and I didn't know what the heck he was talking about. He was seeing me doing what I'm doing right now. I guess he wasn't senile after all. When I speak at general assemblies in the schools there are hundreds of kids, and the same in the Native Studies classes at the university.

When I speak I don't write anything down. It just comes to me when I go in. When I go in it comes to me. I don't carry a paper. When I talk, the message travels from my brain, to my heart, to my mouth. That's how I speak now. I don't talk from my brain to my mouth. I used to talk like that. I was a liar; I was a pretender, like I said, before I went through my healing. Now there are more good qualities in my life, like honesty and trust. I trust people more. They probably trust me more, too. In my teens and when I was growing up, I felt such hatred towards white people. I hurt a lot of white people. Now, many of my good friends are white people. You turned out to be a good friend who I can trust. That's why I'm talking to you like this, telling you all these things, because I wouldn't be talking to someone I just met about this stuff. You have to get to know the person. And telling you my story, that's a kind of healing in my life.

I don't know if you believe me or not, but when I tell you my story, I'm healing myself. I feel good after talking to you. I'm doing something good for you and I'm healing myself when I talk about all these things. That's why I want you to call this story, "*wîcihitowin.*" That one Cree word means lots of things in English. It

means helping each other, respecting each other. Because you're white and I'm Aboriginal. Partnership, in other words. Every time I share my story with people, I feel all healed up. My self-esteem goes up. Like now when I talk about residential school it doesn't hurt me. And the sexual abuse I experienced, I felt such shame, I didn't want to talk about it to anybody. Talking about it was a way to heal myself. Now I can talk about these things without crying, without emotional effect. That means I'm healed for myself, or else they would still be in me. That's what I used to talk about in my sharing circles. Instead of getting drunk, getting half cut and moaning on about how they used to whip me and things like that. That wasn't healing.

I think the real healing came more easily for me because I never lost my Cree language. I think that's what made it easy for me, because I knew who I was with my language. If I had lost my language, I would have lost everything. For me, knowing my language was the greatest thing I had going for me. Speaking your own language, you understand more. There are certain Cree words that can't be properly understood in English. Like the word for love, *sâkihiwêwin*. It means you're "putting more," like more into what you're saying. I can't even explain it. All your feelings are in that word, and English can't come close to capturing the full meaning of it.

I learned Cree from very small, so I'm lucky, because I know who I am with my Cree language. That's why I always stress to teach Cree when I speak to schools. My kids don't even talk Cree. They understand some, but they can't speak it. I figure they're kind of lost without it. It was my Cree that kept me going. That was what brought me back to the way my *mosôm* taught me, to the discipline. I started

disciplining myself again after he healed me. I started looking ahead for the betterment of Dennis.

I still have my Cree language, but I had to relearn my own culture. I went back to my culture. When I speak to students at the First Nations University as a teaching assistant my first question is usually, "Do you believe in your traditional culture?" Some of them haven't had any contact with their traditional culture at all, not like the way I was raised by my *mosôm*. I can usually tell which ones come from dysfunctional families. I can tell who is coming to class high or with a hangover. I can tell by their eyes, by their sunglasses. I can tell by the way someone moves, and I can smell the booze on them from a mile away. There's always one that comes in half cut, because that's the only way he can be in there, the only way he can talk, to let it all out. I know because I was that guy.

I don't judge them because I know what they're going through. Maybe down the road, if they're like me, they'll go back to the traditional ways. Most of these young people don't speak their language, and that's how they're lost. See, if I hadn't known my language, I would still be lost. I would still be that-guy-from-the-residential-school, and I never would have found my way back, but I started attending ceremonies and following my traditional spirituality. I have greater balance now--emotion, physical, mental, and spiritual. My spirituality has played a big part in where I am today. I am where I am now because I found my culture and spirituality again, and now I know who I am. Now I know my place.

That's why there is more healing now, like in the jails, they allow Elders to come in now and do sweats and teach the traditional ways. Now, when some of those

people come out of jail, they're doing good on their reserves, helping people, doing a good job. Some of them have become *oskâpêwis*, helping the Elders. They're coming out of jail knowing who they are. They relearned their culture and their spirituality. I can talk about it, because I'm the living proof that it works.

I'm a pipe carrier for my brother, Bill. He was a pipe carrier before he moved into the Elder's role. Being a pipe carrier is the next step up from *oskâpêwis*, the helper. If Bill goes to a Sundance, I have to follow him with the pipes. When we go to Sundances, most of the Elders recognize my grandfather's pipe. They say, "Hey, I know that pipe, that's Tom Sapp's pipe," and the story starts running from there. The pipe is like our pen; it carries all the stories, oral stories in our case. I don't just carry the pipe. I have to go through rituals of prayer and fasting before I bring the pipe out to Bill. A person might be an *oskâpêwis* or they might be a pipe carrier their whole life. It takes a lifetime to learn it all.

I've closed a chapter in my life that was about the abuse and the trauma I went through. My *mosôm* said I must be brave to go through what I went through and survive. My *mosôm* died in 1987. Just before he died he presented me with an eagle feather. You have to earn an eagle feather, because eagles are sacred to us. They soar up high, close to the Creator. I earned my first eagle feather at my *mosôm*'s last Sundance. I cried the day I earned that eagle feather. It took a while for me to realize that I earned that eagle feather because of what I went through in my life, and what I'm doing for myself. I earned my second eagle feather from my brother at one of his Sundances. Receiving an eagle feather is the highest honour. An eagle feather is like a medal of valour. We use every part of the eagle, so nothing is wasted. My eagle

feathers are hanging on my wall, next to my diplomas, to remind me of what I've been through, and what goals I'm supposed to set.

My *mosôm* used to tell me that I was going to be talking to respected people. He was right. Not too long ago, I was invited to speak to a gathering of chiefs from all over the province. Over the last ten years our organization, the Saskatchewan First Nations Network on Disabilities, has been fighting for a place at the table, to get disability issues on the agenda. And now the doors have opened for us.

When I spoke to the chiefs I shared some stories from my life, and I told them about my *mosôm*. I told them that when he was a sniper in the war, he had allies backing him up. I looked around that table and I told them, "There's a lot of power in this room. We're all different people from different tribes and different reserves, and I think this is where *my* allies are," I told them. I got a really good reception at that meeting. They gave me a standing ovation, and it really reinforced for me that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. At the end of the meeting they invited me to go and speak at the U.N. on behalf of their organization. They want me to represent them on Aboriginal disability issues.

When I speak to groups I always talk about my *mosôm*. I always mention that he was a veteran. The only time we remember them is Remembrance Day, but I try and think about him every day. He was my role model. I looked up to him when I was young, and I looked up to him when I was dealing with having my disability. My *mosôm* did his job raising me, and it's because of him that I am where I am today.

I'd like to set up a scholarship fund in my *mosôm*'s name for a student who has a disability. I figured I ought to at least do something like that, in honour of my

grandfather, because he was disabled and I'm disabled. I know what I went through to be here, so I'd like to help other students with disabilities. Even hidden disabilities, because you can't always tell when someone has a disability.

I'll be getting some money from the residential school compensation. I'll take the money. I might as well accept it. We get a lump sum of $10,000 and $3,000 for every year we were in there. How do you put a dollar value on abuse and suffering? What is the cost of losing your culture and your identity? It won't clear away my memories, but it will give me some satisfaction, that they are acknowledging what they did to us.

When I speak to groups I always tell them I'm happy, even though I'm disabled, I'm still happy. I have a happy life. And they always ask me how I can be happy when I'm disabled. They can't understand because they're not disabled themselves. The way I see it, we're all disabled in a way. If people have problems with alcohol, to me that's a disability. When you're drunk you're disabled. When you're on drugs you've got a disability, but a different kind of disability, a mental one. I tell people that if I wasn't in a wheelchair, I bet I wouldn't be here. I would be six feet underground. I was a drunkard. I used to spend my money foolishly. First paycheque was into the bar with the boys, and I became an alcoholic in my teens. Becoming disabled stopped everything. Being in a wheelchair forced me to slow down and listen to what was happening on the inside. I couldn't keep running away anymore. Now I know myself. I know who Dennis is.

I'm still on a healing journey for myself. My self-esteem is higher. I think positive now. I look to the future, not the past. I'm focused on my education and I

want to become an Elder. I'd like to come to the place where my grandchildren could call me *nimosôm*, and it would feel right. It would be a joy. I don't feel that I have earned the right to be called *nimosôm*, to be a grandfather, to be an Elder. We call them Elders in English, but what it means is philosopher, or whatever word you would use for a wise or an educated person. In the past we had war chiefs who planned the battles and led the warriors, but when they were older, they became the peaceful chiefs, the Elders. They were chosen for their character. They had to be good strategists. They had to possess courage, wisdom, humility, and respect.

These were the ones who led the Sundances. They would do Sundances for the Chief, or a feast, things like that. The peaceful chief was the Chief's spokesperson. He was the one who spoke to the village. Something like the U.N. My grandfather's father was a war chief at the Battle of Cut Knife and he went on to become a peaceful chief. His name was *mikisiw-pimihâw* or Flying Eagle.

I need to meet with some Elders, to come to a place where I can appreciate being called a grandfather. It's just like my kids calling me "Dad". They never called me that because I didn't raise them. Their mother raised them. I helped them with financial support and that, but I wasn't there for them physically, so when they first visited me and they started calling me Dad, holy man, it didn't feel right. As they got older and they called me that it felt nice. They remembered who their dad was, and I was kind of grateful for that. I wish I could have been there more for my sons, like my grandfather was for me. I wish I had taught them the Cree language. I wish I had taught them the way I was disciplined, the way my grandfather taught me. Physical

punishment doesn't work. I experienced that and it made me worse. We're all still dealing with the effects of that kind of discipline.

I pray now, all the time. I pray at meals. I pray for my family and friends, even the ones that have passed on. And I still go back and do my rituals, like sweat lodges, Sundances, things like that. And I attend feasts. All these things keep me in place. I know who I am now.

I've been given different names in my life. My *mosôm* used to call me *wâkâyôsis***,** which means Little Bear. At residential school they took away my name and I was just a number, *Number 51*. The kids there gave me the nickname *okimotisk*, which means The Thief, and the students at Kelsey called me *Sodapop Kid*. I'd like to get my last name changed to *Flying Eagle* (*mikisiw-pimihâw*) after my great-great-great grandfather. Today people know me as Dennis Sapp. I used to be this other guy named Dennis, but I didn't know him. I really found who Dennis is. That's why I want my real name written down, because this is Dennis that's talking to you. See, that's what I don't like about some of these stories, when they don't use their real name. You can't picture who it is all along. I think a person's name is very much the person. That's what *I* think anyway.

There is just one thing I still have left to do, to complete my journey. I don't feel ready yet, but I'll know when the time is right. An Elder told me I need to go back to that jail cell and burn sweetgrass. I used to think about seeking revenge. I wanted to kill those cops that did this to me. My grandfather taught me not to seek revenge. I think the most important word for me is forgiveness. You forgive people. We live in a circle. What goes around comes around, so you treat people the way you

want to be treated. My *mosôm* used to tell me not to lie. I keep thinking about the day those cops did this to me. When people ask me what happened to me, I still keep lying about that. The day I can tell people the truth about what happened, and stop saying it was a car accident, I think that's when I'll have come full circle.

The Creator gave me my life back twice. After my neck injury and after this last surgery I just had. It was all meant to be. I'm here for a reason. Whatever happens to me from here on in, I can deal with it. Without being mad at God, at the Creator. And I always thank Him that I'm still alive, that I go on another day. Life can get richer, like my own. The way I feel, I want to live. To live forever. Even if I'm disabled. I want to live forever.

Courtesy Cornerstone Photography

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Introduction

So that is the story of Dennis Sapp, Plains Cree man with quadriplegia. To quote Native scholar Thomas King (2005) from his book, *The Truth About Stories*:

> Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now (p. 119).

For King, storytelling carries with it social and moral responsibilities. King (2005) described the power of stories: "We…knew that stories were medicine, that a story told one way could cure, that the same story told another way could injure" (p. 92). He went on to describe himself as a hopeful pessimist, who writes knowing that none of the stories he tells will change the world, but hoping that they might. It is my hope that I have written Dennis' story in a way that does not hurt, but rather heals. I hope that reading Dennis' story will create greater empathy and cross-cultural understanding, and will assist the reader, who may have had similar life experiences, to find in Dennis a companion on the journey, and perhaps some inspiration to find their way to the path that is right for them. While I do not aim to change the world, I do believe that Dennis' story has the power to transform attitudes and educate for healing and change.

I am grateful to Dennis for trusting me enough to share his story. It has been an honour to witness the telling of his life account related to his sustaining a life-altering injury. One of the main purposes of this research was to make his story available to a wider audience, and so I offer the preceding narrative reconstruction of

his telling to the reader, in the hopes that it might serve as inspiration for persons in a similar situation, and lead to improved professional practice for those in the field of counselling.

In the discussion that follows I want to honour the spirit in which Dennis shared his story, and I want to respect the trust he has had in me. In the present study I did not engage in an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1995; Polkinghorne & Bribbons, 1999), as my aim was not the production of general knowledge, but rather the particular, contextualized knowing one derives from narrative reasoning (Bruner, 1986). In this study, the main analysis of the data is the narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1995; Polkinghorne & Bribbons, 1999), which appears in the fourth chapter, in the form of a life story told in the first person. The discussion that follows is a series of reflections that were not derived from a process of formal data coding or thematic analysis. Rather, they are more like a conversation between Dennis' story, my own researcher reflections, and related research literature. They are the tentative, curious, and humble explorations of a novice, non-Aboriginal researcher on her first foray into cross-cultural inquiry. It was my intention in the discussion chapter to avoid armchair analysis, to let Dennis' words speak for themselves as much as possible, and to avoid conjecture or writing over the narrative. In this narrative analysis it is the narrative that represents the data. The discussion chapter is more a series of researcher observations and tentative explorations.

In keeping with the narrative, constructivist basis of this research, and following from my stated research questions, I review some of the ways Dennis has

made sense of the difficult experiences in his life, including his use of storytelling to convey his sense of what it means to be an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia. Next, I review some of the influences and insights that have contributed to his understanding of his life's purpose and meaning. In the process of research, I repeatedly invited Dennis to suggest titles for his story, and in this chapter I go on to discuss these Cree titles. I include a discussion of the important process of naming in the thesis document, as related to the titles, as well as to Dennis' request that his full name be used in the narrative. The discussion chapter ends with my thoughts on the context of the study, with suggestions for further research, and with some reflections on how the present study might contribute to the practice of counselling.

Sense and Meaning-Making

Dennis makes sense of his disability and finds meaning in it in many ways. In fact, he says he needs to tell his whole life story, from early beginnings to the present day, in order to describe what it means to be an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia. In the pages that follow, I will discuss the following ways by which Dennis navigates the difficult experiences in his life, making sense of them and finding meaning: (a) storytelling, (b) benefit finding, (c) believing in a just world and the importance of forgiveness, (d) focusing on gratitude and appreciation, and (e) focusing on future goals and building progressively on his successes.

Storytelling

For Dennis, the answer to the question, "What does it mean to be an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia?" cannot be reduced to a list of themes; it is the story of his whole life, as evidenced in his opening words, "If you want to know

about my life as an Aboriginal man with quadriplegia, I think I would start right from the beginning, and right up to where I am now, because I think it will make sense, my being a quad." His most honest answer to that question is the story he tells, the rich, complex whole. O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, and Weenie (2004) argued that, "from an Indigenous perspective, our stories can be the only truth and knowledge we can claim as our own" (p. 3). Reducing an informant's story to a list of themes, derived through a process of what Bruner (1986) termed *paradigmatic reasoning*, may be helpful for certain purposes, but the process ultimately diminishes the full meaning and impact of the participant's story. The meaning is in the entire text:

> Unlike quantitative work, which can be interpreted through its tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meaning in its entire text. Just as a piece of literature is not equivalent to its "plot summary", qualitative research is not contained in its abstracts. Qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading (Richardson, 2001, p. 924).

While Dennis' story educates the reader, it also resonates with the reader in a way that a policy document or academic article derived from a paradigmatic mode of reasoning cannot, drawing out our empathy and enriching our understanding of complex social, historical and psychological phenomena.

Although generalization is not the aim of narrative inquiry, reading Dennis' story offers a window in to a people's collective story. According to Spigelman (2001), it is the readers of a narrative who, "perform this act of generalization…based on the density of detail, the selection of incidents, and the narrative skill of the researcher" (p. 66). Dennis' personal injury is situated in an historic and socio-political context that featured the supposedly well-intentioned, yet patronizing and ultimately devastating goal of assimilating him into the dominant culture by

"civilizing" him and educating the "Indian-ness" out of him (Bull, 1991; Caldwell, 1967; Chrisjohn and Young, 1997; Dailey, 1988; Deiter, 1999; Hogdson, 1990; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999). It is certainly not just a case of one man being in the wrong place at the wrong time. His personal journey, and his injury while in police custody, occur against a backdrop of high rates of violence and alcohol abuse related to the loss of land, culture, language, and identity experienced by the Aboriginal community. Dennis' story does more than recount one man's experience. In sharing his personal story, Dennis educates the reader on the deeper historic and socio-political underpinnings of what are often stereotyped, on the surface, as Native social problems. In this way, Dennis' telling is a political act, similar to the experience of women in the second wave of the feminist movement. As women began to share their stories and make connections, feminists in the 1970's declared, "The personal is political." Each time Dennis tells his story he undoes his assimilation and colonization (O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004). As McLeod (2007) asserted:

> Words are like arrows that can be shot at the narratives of the colonial power (Vizenor, 1978). Word arrows have transformative power and can help Indigenous people come home. They help to establish a new discursive space. Every time a story is told, every time one word of an Indigenous language is spoken, we are resisting the deconstruction of our collective memory" (McLeod, 2007, p. 67).

The residential school experience cut Dennis off from the stories of his people. As he remembers himself, he re-stories his life, and finds himself, his voice, and his place in the story. He constructs a coherent personal narrative and finds meaning and healing, and his remembering also contributes to the collective Cree narrative memory (McLeod, 2007). "Collective narrative memory is what puts our

singular lives into a larger context" (p. 11) and "part of decolonizing Cree consciousness is for collective narrative memory to be awakened" (p. 9).

As a person with a disability working for healing and change, Dennis is like a "wounded healer" (Nouwen, 1972) and a "wounded storyteller" (Frank, 1995). "His wound gives him his narrative power" (Frank, 1995, p. xi). Furthermore, "As wounded, people may be cared for, but as storytellers, they care for others...their injuries become the source of the potency of their stories [and they] create empathic bonds between themselves and their listeners" (Frank, 1995: xxi). While he was in college completing high school Dennis overcame great shyness and discovered the power of his story:

> I excelled in doing presentations and essays. Why I excelled, I figured, was because I had my life. I talked about my life. I told the students about my grandfather, about my time at residential school, about my marriage and kids. I would talk about disabilities all the time in this course I was in. And when I did those presentations, everything was silent. It kind of scared me. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. It was totally silent, and when I talked, everybody was looking right at me the whole time. That was a great accomplishment in my life, for me to speak in front of so many people, because growing up I was shy, and I never thought I would ever do things like that.

Benefit Finding

One way Dennis finds meaning and makes sense of the difficult experiences in his life is to always try to find the positive in a situation, or "benefit-finding" (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Higgins & Leibovitz, 1999). Dennis attributes still being alive to his injury, as well as finding his identity:

> I tell people that if I wasn't in a wheelchair, I bet I wouldn't be here. I would be six feet underground. I was a drunkard. I used to spend my money foolishly. First paycheque was into the bar with the boys, and I became an alcoholic in my teens. Becoming disabled stopped everything. Being in a wheelchair forced me to slow down and listen to what was happening on the

> inside. I couldn't keep running away anymore. Now I know myself. I know who Dennis is.

Dennis believes that if he hadn't been injured he would have surely ended up in jail, a possibility underscored by Statistics Canada's 2001 profile on Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Although Aboriginal peoples represented only 2% of the adult population in 1998-99 (Statistics Canada, 2001), they represented 17% of persons in custody. Disproportionate incarceration rates are even higher in the Western provinces. For example, in 1998-99 Aboriginal persons made up 8% of the adult population in Saskatchewan, but they accounted for 76% of persons admitted to adult provincial correctional facilities (Statistics Canada, 2001).

However, Dennis believes that his disability changed the course of his life and brought purpose and meaning to his life so that he avoided incarceration:

> You have to remember how I was treated at residential school. See, that created a big conflict in my life. That's why you see so much violence and abuse today, and so many Aboriginal people in jail. That's where I probably would've ended up, if I was still walking today. I think it changed me to a better person, being disabled. I look at my disability as an enrichment in my life. That's why I always say I'm happy being disabled. I'm trying to help people now, instead of maiming or killing them.

Another way Dennis positively reframes having a disability is by acknowledging the increased social support he has experienced:

> That's why I like being like this. A lot of people get curious and they want to know what happened to me, and so I tell them my story. It has brought more people into my life, more friendly people.

In a story he told during an interview, Dennis recounted being left alone without care while his caregivers at the time went out all night partying. While Dennis acknowledges this as neglect, he still gleaned some positive learning from the

experience, in that he discovered that he could sleep on his front without needing to be turned every two hours.

Speaking about the residential school experience he searches for positives, and acknowledges that he learned to read and write there, which ultimately helped him to obtain a university education. Dennis even finds the positive as he recalls lying paralyzed on a cold cement jail cell floor:

> I told the guard that I was thirsty and needed water, and he rolled me to the sink and over onto my stomach. That's what saved me: being left on my stomach all that time. The pressure emptied my bladder, which was very full from drinking so much. Lots of quads have their urine back up, and it damages their kidneys, but I was lucky.

This word, "lucky" comes up again and again when Dennis tells his story. This concept of luck in Aboriginal culture emerged repeatedly as well in Hanson and Hampton's (2000) study on the strengths sustaining survivors of the residential school system in Saskatchewan. According to the authors of that study, "[l]uck [is] not a random whim of nature, but an ability to tune in harmoniously to a spiritual force… [and] [f]eeling lucky is a form of optimism, of being grateful for what you have or what you are given" (p. 135).

Believing in a Just World/Forgiveness

Another way Dennis makes sense of his life and finds meaning in difficult experiences is his belief in the virtues of justice and forgiveness, which he learned from his grandfather's adage, "what goes around comes around." This frees him to let go of his desire for revenge, knowing that on some level justice will be done.

> I used to think about seeking revenge. I wanted to kill those cops that did this to me. My *mosôm* taught me not to seek revenge. "No, don't even think like that," he used to tell me. "What goes around comes around," he used to always tell me. And I heard that, in the end, what went around did come

> around for that cop who had hurt so many Aboriginal people over the years, the one who beat me up. I think the most important word for me is forgiveness. You forgive people. We live in a circle. What goes around comes around, so you treat people the way you want to be treated.

This reminds me of the just world hypothesis (Lerner, 1965, 1971; Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). According to this theory, people have a need to believe that the events of their lives are not random, but follow from their choices and actions. People find it adaptive to believe that, on some level, their misfortunes are merited (Bulman & Wortman, 1977). Bulman and Wortman found that people with spinal cord injuries from traumatic accidents were more likely to be happy, in spite of being paralyzed, if they believed in a just world. I find myself wondering if the English use of the expression, "what goes around comes around" confounds the meaning of the concept in Aboriginal culture, with its emphasis on the circle, with a non-Aboriginal view of karma. I don't want to attempt to interpret what Dennis or his grandfather meant by the expression, or to make, "assumptions of interpretations that are derived from Native teachings framed through a Western 'lens'" (Lambe & Swamp, 2002, p. 433), something Lambe and Swamp described as a type of cultural assimilation. So I decided to search for something in the literature and then I called Dennis for confirmation. I came upon a concept described in the literature that comes close to describing this expression "what goes around comes around." In Cree there is a verb *pastahow* that means, "someone brings retribution on himself" (Timmins, 2002, p. 14). *Pastahow* refers to, "a spiritual harm or 'debt' that can be visited upon the relatives or future generations" when the balance of life is disrupted: "[w]hat you do now, or is done to you, puts in place what will happen in the future; how we treat each other has [an] impact on [us]" (Timmins, 2000, p. 14).

The noun *pastahowin* is the "process through which people antagonize spirit beings or other humans by diverse acts of commission or omission and thus reflexively provoke misfortune" (Brightman, 1993, p.103). When I call Dennis to better ascertain what he means when he uses the expression, "what goes around comes around," I catch him on his cell phone at the mall. He says his understanding of the word *pastahowin* is that it means "sin" or "wronging someone," and if you wrong someone it comes back to you. He says the closest translation is, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." When we withhold or we wrong someone, we stop the flow and this is reflected in increased negativity in our lives. By giving and forgiving we create a channel for more good to come our way. Dennis told me that since he began to give something back there is more kindness in his life. What goes around comes around. And he said that he heard that the police officer whose beating he alleges left him a quadriplegic went on to die a violent and untimely death. What goes around comes around.

Dennis' grandfather connects "what goes around comes around" with the ethic of forgiveness, and Strelan (2006) has documented this connection in the research literature. Strelan examined the relationship between belief in a just world and forgiveness. His study of 275 undergraduate psychology students found that personal belief in a just world, measured using Dalbert's (1999) Personal Belief in a Just World Scale, was positively related to forgiveness of others, measured using subscales from the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman, Michael, Rasmussen, & Billings, 2005), and that gratitude, measured using the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2004), mediated the

relationship between personal belief in a just world and forgiveness of others. Strelan's study confirmed his hypothesis that "individuals with a strong belief in a just world are more likely to forgive others" (p. 7) and he suggests that, "a grateful disposition appears to provide some explanation for why personal belief in a just world…is related to forgiveness" (p. 8).

Having Gratitude and Appreciation

Similar to his constant search for the silver lining in every grey cloud, Dennis lives his life focusing on gratitude for what he has, and appreciation of those who have helped him. He compares his disability to those of others and is thankful that he has the abilities he has:

> And there were other people there that were more disabled than me. Some of them could just move their heads, and they couldn't move their arms at all, and I was thinking, "Geez, I'm lucky. I'm thankful I can use my arms." Sometimes I would look at this blind guy, and he was determined to live as normal a life as he could, and I would shut my eyes, holy man, and try to imagine losing my eyesight, and I would thank the Creator that I'm not blind. I started appreciating what I had. I had my mind.

As Dennis becomes involved in the disabled community he meets people with disabilities he has never heard of; through his friendship with a man with a degenerative condition he comes to value his own relative longevity:

> And some of them had degenerative conditions, like my friend with multiple sclerosis. He gave himself about two years, and then he said he'd start going downhill after that. He was living as normal a life as he could, although he had MS and he knew he was dying. "Don't pity me, Dennis," he used to tell me. He was blind and bedridden, and he never knew if he was going to make it one more day. We were friends right up to the end. I looked up to him and he inspired me.

As Dennis "relearns the world" (Neimeyer, 2000) after a traumatic loss, he rebuilds his life, and the meaning of his life is "deepened by [a] continuing awareness

of that which he no longer [has], and [his] renewed appreciation for that which [he does]" (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 40).

Having a Future Focus/Goal Orientation

As well, his focus on future goals keeps him moving forward with hope as he builds on each new success and gains greater self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; 1994) with each accomplishment:

> I completed my Master's thesis in the fall of 2006, and I figured that was the ultimate, getting my Master's degree, because I had fulfilled my goal, but I have to keep looking towards the future for myself. I always have to focus on my next goal. The next hurdle I might go after is my PhD. For me, doing a PhD is like setting out to scale a mountain. If I can reach that peak I'll have accomplished all that I've set out to do. Up until now, all my other challenges have been like little hills compared to that.

This is a man who had to make several attempts at completing Grade 8, and who returned to school at the age of 39 to complete his high school education. Dennis possesses a keen awareness of his limits and abilities, in that he is able to push himself just to the edge of his capabilities without taking on too much at one time and experiencing failure. With each new mastery situation his self-esteem is bolstered and his self-efficacy is strengthened:

> When I started doing things for myself I started liking myself. My self-esteem was going back up. I started doing exercises. I used to do pulleys, and I'd do an extra one. I'd start with five pounds weights. To me that was lots. I'd do ten, and the next day I would do eleven, you know, and the following day twelve, things like that. Doing these things made me feel successful. I started finding my self-esteem. It helped to see what other disabled people were doing, what other quads were doing, things like that.

Influences and Insights into Purpose and Meaning

Dennis' story reflects a hard-earned self-understanding. There are many influences and insights that contribute to his understanding of his life's purpose and

meaning. Some of these include (a) *enculturation*, and his return to traditional Aboriginal culture and spirituality, (b) *a near death experience* that galvanizes his sense of purpose, (c) the influence of *key role models and peer helpers* and his subsequent desire to become a positive role model and peer helper for others, and (d) his *living in two worlds*, evidenced in his ability to forge respectful and mutually-beneficial relationships with non-Aboriginal people and to successfully navigate both worlds.

Enculturation

Dennis' healing path includes remembering the teachings of his grandfather and a subsequent relearning of traditional Plains Cree culture and spirituality. He finds his identity and he comes to know his place again. As a child he felt a sense of belonging to the group as an *oskâpêwis*, and now he has become a pipe carrier. Zimmerman, Washienko, Walter, & Dyer (1996) suggested that enculturation, or "the process by which individuals learn about and identify with their minority culture" (Walters & Simoni, 2002, p. 523), has a protective function that mitigates the effect of negative life stressors. In their reconceptualization of Native women's health research, Walters and Simoni (2002) proposed what they call an indigenist stress-coping model as an alternative to the "focus on pathology that characterizes much of the research on Native peoples" (p. 523). Walters and Simoni (2002) cited Browne and Fiske (2001) who have warned that a "failure to account for socioenvironmental contexts can lead to pathologized perceptions of Natives, reinforce power inequities, and perpetuate paternalism and dependency in regard to health care" (in Walters & Simoni, 2002, p. 521). Walters and Simoni stressed the importance of situating

Aboriginal health problems in a fourth world context (O'Neil, 1986), that is, one that acknowledges the position of Indigenous peoples as a subjugated minority amidst a colonizing, subordinating majority who possess systemic power and privilege (O'Neil, 1986). The indigenist stress-coping model defines historical and current trauma as key stressors in the lives of Aboriginal women, and I believe the model has relevance for men as well. According to Walters and Simoni (2002), "precisely how historical and current traumas (e.g., unresolved grief and mourning related to loss of land and place and the negotiation of invisibility in urban settings) affect the health of Native women has yet to be empirically documented, [but] within Indigenous communities these stressors are viewed as key factors related to health" (p. 523). Dennis' life story illustrates the model well, and functions as narrative documentation of its effectiveness. The model draws on various research studies to postulate that the following four factors act as buffers against the increased vulnerability of Aboriginal persons to the ill-effects of living as fourth world people: (a) identity attitudes (Walters, 1999), (b) enculturation (Zimmerman, Washienko, Walter & Dyer, 1996), (c) spiritual methods of coping (Pargament, 1999; Simoni, Kersin, & Martone, 2002), and (d) traditional health and healing practices (Buchwald, Beals, & Manson, 2000; Marbella, Harris, Dieher, & Ignace, 1998). Dennis has come to a positive self-identity as an Aboriginal person and he embraces his culture and spirituality, infusing traditional prayer and ceremony into his everyday life as well as participating in more formal Sundances, pipe ceremonies, and sweat lodges.

> I don't judge them because I know what they're going through. Maybe down the road, if they're like me, they'll go back to the traditional ways. Most of these young people don't speak their language, and that's how they're lost. See, if I hadn't known my language, I would still be lost. I would still be that-

> guy-from-the-residential-school, and I never would have found my way back, but I started attending ceremonies and following my traditional spirituality. I have greater balance now-- emotion, physical, mental, and spiritual. My spirituality has played a big part in where I am today. I am where I am now because I found my culture and spirituality again, and now I know who I am. Now I know my place.

In his internship report on the impact of residential schools on Aboriginal spirituality, Dennis wrote of the spiritual renewal occurring in the lives of many Aboriginal people:

> During my travels among our people throughout the Aboriginal country I have made many personal observations. One observation that I've made is the resurgence of our values and belief system, especially among our generation and that of our children. Our Aboriginal spirituality is no longer something to be ashamed of, to be spoken about in private or to be whispered about. Most Aboriginal people like me are proud of their spiritual heritage. My grandfather, Tom Sapp, used to say that the "path of the *Nehiyow* is a tough road to follow", but it will get you where you want to go (Sapp, 2006, p.4).

Near Death Experience

Dennis had a near-death experience part way through our research journey. The summer before I interviewed him he went in for a surgery on his bladder and nearly died from a systemic infection. He described seeing a figure that he thought might be a little bear, which he refers to as his guardian angel, hovering over him as he moved in and out of consciousness, guiding and protecting him. Dennis was sure he was dying and he made a promise to the Creator that he would work for him if he brought him back to life; his survival was proof to him that he still has work left to do, and he must do what the Creator wants him to do. This near-death experience galvanized Dennis' sense of purpose and meaning, and served as proof that his traditional spirituality works. In a prospective study of survivors of cardiac arrest who reported near-death experiences published in the mainstream British medical

journal, *The Lancet*, Lommel, Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich (2001) found the following transformative effects in persons who had survived a near-death experience: more self-assured, more socially aware, enhanced religious and spiritual beliefs, greater sense of meaning and purpose in life, decreased fear of death, more loving, accepting, and empathetic. Dennis was still sorting out the meaning of his experience with the aid of an Elder when I interviewed him, but it is clear that this was a turning point in his life with far-reaching implications for his sense of self and his sense of purpose.

Influence of Key Role Models and Peer Helpers

In his study of how people develop a sense of self-efficacy, Bandura (1986, 1994) emphasized the importance of vicarious success and modelling on self-efficacy. By witnessing the success of others and learning from key role models, Dennis found the courage and inspiration to build new relationships, succeed academically, and to find himself and his spirituality. His grandfather was by far the most important role model of all. Other role models included other persons with disabilities who showed him how to live well with a disability. According to Wilder (2006), "exposure to people with similar disabilities is considered beneficial, both in terms of modelling and emotional support" (p. 67).

Dennis also draws on his knowledge of the way his people lived prior to contact and prior to the residential schools, and these historical role models act as a powerful resource in the present:

> I used to remember there was nothing like loneliness in my family back then, only cheerfulness. Today I'm sometimes lonely, but I learned that at residential school, but like evil, I didn't see anything evil in my family, nothing, and there was no fighting. I don't remember them fighting or

> arguing, like I said, nothing like that. So, I kind of figured they were living the old traditional way. I used to wonder how my ancestors lived. There would be 10,000 people living together like that. Sharing. Respecting each other. People knew where their places were. And like me I knew where my place was, at that time.

Dennis received timely support from Don Morningchild, a peer counsellor from the Canadian Paraplegic Association. Don became his friend and a great role model. Dennis went on to become a peer counsellor himself and the experience was a factor in his returning to school to take professional training. Relatively few studies (Kelly, 2007; Sherman, DeVinney, & Sperling, 2004; Wilson & Thompson, 1983) have been conducted on the role of peer support in the lives of persons with spinal cord injuries. In her study comparing persons with violently acquired spinal cord injury (VASCI) who participated in a program as peer role models with those who did not, Kelly (2007) found those with VASCI who worked as peer supporters had higher levels of community competence (more aware of resources and more integrated in the community) and were more focused on goal attainment than those not involved in such programs. Sherman, DeVinney, and Sperling (2004) studied the role of past involvement as a peer mentor to adjustment to spinal cord injury, and found that involvement as a peer support person was related to greater occupational activity.

It is important to note that it was the knowledge that he could become a positive role model for others that helped Dennis to choose his education over "his old friend alcohol," as he put it in one of the interviews, when his role model and counsellor at community college was encouraging him to continue in school:

> In 1995, everything changed for me, because I was going to be kicked out of school. They were going to let me go because I had poor attendance. My marks weren't great, but I was passing, so one of the counsellors there took me aside and we talked for a long time. He said he believed in me, and told

> me I had what it took to do well in school. He said that if I finished the program, I could be a really good role model for other Native people with spinal cord injuries. That I could be the first one. He gave me a really good pep talk. So that kind of clicked, and I started really going after my education in 1995, and I passed my Grade 8.

Living in Two Worlds

A part of Dennis' healing derives from his ability to maintain his identity while finding his way in the non-Aboriginal culture, something he calls living in two worlds:

> I have to take things in stride in a white community. I was taught differently in the white world. In order to survive I had to learn their language and adjust to their culture. I've had to learn to live in two worlds, but it works.

Dennis described the effect losing his primary caregivers had on his development, and the ensuing hatred he felt toward white people:

> See, if my life had not been interrupted like that, if I had continued my childhood under the care and teaching of my grandfather, with all the love and affection of my grandmother, I would be a different man today. I would have been a better person right from the start. I would have grown up respecting people and appreciating things. I would have always known how to love. But instead, I was sent to residential school, and I came out with a deep hatred of white people, because these were white people who were teaching us, who were doing these awful things to us. And it took me so long to heal from the trauma, and I'm still healing from that.

Dennis' ability to move from feeling anger and deep hatred to helping and educating is a strength that helps him to forge respectful and mutually-beneficial relationships with non-Aboriginal people and to successfully navigate both worlds.

> Now there are more good qualities in my life, like honesty and trust. I trust people more. They probably trust me more, too. In my teens and when I was growing up, I felt such hatred towards white people. I hurt a lot of white people. Now, many of my good friends are white people. You turned out to be a good friend who I can trust. That's why I'm talking to you like this, telling you all these things, because I wouldn't be talking to someone I just met about this stuff. You have to get to know the person. And telling you my story, that's a kind of healing in my life.

The idea that one lives and works between two worlds appears in the work of many Aboriginal persons in popular literature, film, and scholarly writing, and it is apparent that important cross-cultural communication and healing can occur at the juncture of these two worlds. In his critical examination of the ethics of research with Aboriginal people, Ermine (2001) wrote:

> I try to position myself firmly at the intersection where the two worlds of Indigenous and Western Peoples meet and where two sets of intentions about the other have been brought to the encounter. It is sometimes a gift as much as a curse to see the two worldviews simultaneously, but perhaps it is necessary to have this positioning to be able to articulate an ethical research process that speaks in a language of higher possibilities than what is standard in academic scholarship (p. 9).

Ermine goes on to describe the "ethical space" that exists when two sorts of space interact:

> Ethical space is created when the intentions of two entities structure space between them in two different ways, and when the sets of intentions confront each other then "ethical space is set up instantaneously" (Poole, 1972:5). This "ethical space" is potentially a productive and appropriate position from which to express and negotiate an ethical order that crosses cultural borders (p. 9).

Self-Titling

Kacen (2002) suggested a new method of analyzing life story interviews in which the interviewer asks participants to give a title to their life story after the main interview has been completed. Her study of seven battered women who were asked to give titles to their life stories indicated that these story titles, "reflect the main themes of the life story and that by asking the narrators to title their life story we are giving them the power to lead the story analysis" (p. 10). While the purpose of the present study was not to generate themes, I did ask Dennis at various points throughout the research process if he could suggest a title for his life story or chapter titles for the different periods of his life. At first he said that he couldn't think of any, and then, at

the end of the transcript review process, he spontaneously listed off a few ideas he had and explained the meaning they had for him:

> *Dennis*: A couple of words came up for what you said about naming the story, about what I would call it. Something like The Wandering Spirit comes to mind, or Prairie Wind. It's got to do with sunshine anyway, Sunrise maybe. There are little meanings to those things.
>
> *Karen*: Meanings? In your life?
>
> *Dennis*: Yes, like Sunrise, it's about my rebirth, and Prairie Wind is about the freedom, being free to go where you want to go, and The Wandering Spirit, is about how I used to wander about my culture, about my Roman Catholic, I was a Wandering Spirit. That's what came up anyway just now. Something to do with my culture. I always try and stick with those. Maybe Raindrops, something like that, I don't know. Why raindrops? For my eyes….all the crying I used to do, you know….things that would mean something.

As soon as I heard these ideas, I started playing with them as section titles and they became the four chapters, *maskotêw-askiy-yôtin*: prairie wind, *papâmâcihow-âcâhk*: wandering spirit, *kimiwan*: raindrops, and *sâkâstêw*: sunrise. In a simple and poetic way, these words are fitting metaphors for the different periods of Dennis' life. I know that when I read "prairie wind" it evokes for me a strong image of that young boy with so much freedom, out making the rounds of his rabbit snares on horseback, suggesting a spaciousness which contrasts so poignantly with the image of him "fenced in" at residential school, and the segregation and strict regimentation he experienced there. Much later in the writing process I asked Dennis what he wanted to call his whole story, and he called me back later that afternoon with *maskosis* or Little Bear. Dennis told me this is the spiritual name he was given by a respected Elder and healer. I will refrain from any comment on that very sacred and special name, as I believe it would be inappropriate for me to do so.

Dennis' first title suggestion, *wîcihitowin*, could be described as the "process title" for this thesis, and his later choice of main title could be described as the "product title." This is the main title because we wanted to privilege Dennis' story, yet we also wanted to acknowledge that the narrative is embedded in a larger research context, one of *wîcihitowin*, or partnership, mutual respect, and helping one another.

The power to name himself is important for Dennis and when he communicated the desire that his full name be used in the thesis document I wanted to respect his wishes. I did not wish to take his name away yet again, as traditional names had been changed "when the English came" and then his name was taken away at residential school and replaced by a number. Dennis' strong drive for self-determination and personal sovereignty has led him to apply to change his surname to Flying Eagle (*mikisiw-pimihâw)*, the name of his warrior-turned-peaceful-chief great-great-great grandfather. "Naming is always the first act of colonization. The power to name oneself and self-define is also a form of resistance and part of the process of decolonization of the mind and soul" (Dei, 2003, p. 4).

Context of the Study

> *Each telling of a story, whether in speech or in writing, generates another story, a story of relations between people and their worlds (McLeod, 2007, p. xi).*

I wish the reader to keep in mind that Dennis' life and story are dynamic, evolving, and in constant flux. This thesis and the narrative reconstruction of his life story related to his sustaining a life-altering disability are static, academic discourse, shared at a fixed point in time, for a specific purpose. The poet Paul Valery said, "A poem is never finished. It is abandoned," and that is how I feel as I attempt to finish

this thesis. It is my hope that this document might act as a catalyst for further reflection and action. It is my hope that this will be more of a beginning than an ending, and that more might come from my effort to share Dennis' story and our research journey of *wîcihitowin*.

We all make the story our own in some way, and we take what we will from it, depending on how it touches our own story. For example, I was reading the transcript of the interview in which he describes being abducted from his grandparents' home back to Dennis, and when I got to the part where Dennis describes how his grandfather would go looking for him down by the river every day, and how he wouldn't let him out of his sight whenever he came home to visit after that, I started to cry so much that I had to ask Dennis to take over the reading until I could compose myself. At the end of the review session we spoke about this briefly. Dennis said he was surprised that it had affected me so, because that part of his story always made him laugh, as he recalled being that little boy and how humorous it seemed to him to be followed around by his grandfather. So perhaps this thesis is my story of Dennis which I offer to you:

> Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now (King, 2005, p. 9).

Suggestions for Further Research

There are three areas of potential research I see arising from this study: participation follow-up studies, research into the ethical issues and practical challenges inherent in translating oral discourse into written narrative, and

exploration of the potential role of language learning for healing, regaining cultural identity, and a renewed sense of self and belonging.

Participation Follow-up Studies

Participation follow-up studies might look at the experience of "being studied" and having one's story written and published as a thesis, perhaps interviewing participants at various stages of the research process and at intervals after the completion of the study. If I had had more time, I would have liked to have given Dennis the whole thesis (he reviewed the Results section and the Discussion chapter) and asked for his honest reaction, and then crafted a polyvocal text (Richardson, 2001) on a split page with his voice, mine and related literature.

Orality and Literacy

In preparing the narrative that appears in the Results section, I realized that there is a need for more research on the ethical challenges inherent in presenting an Aboriginal oral story as a piece of academic writing. While I moved from recorded interview to written transcript of the oral storytelling, and between these and the written narrative, I struggled with ethical, political, epistemological, and practical questions related to representation. As mentioned earlier, I constantly checked in with Dennis to ascertain whether or not my writing resonated with his intentions and meaning. I wonder where the appropriate balance is between simply reprinting an interview transcript and completely rewriting someone's story. Something is definitely lost in the writing, some of the humour, some of the irony, some of the joy. Basil Johnston addressed this problem in the epilogue of his collection of Ojibway short stories entitled, *Moose Meat and Wild Rice*, "The stories as written cannot

adequately convey the real nature or impart the scope of that sense of wit and humour that forms an integral part of the Ojibway people and their character" (Johnston, 1978, p. 188). For more on issues related to orality and literacy, I refer the reader to Eigenbrod (1995), Gee (1985), King (2005), Murray & Rice, (1999), and Stevenson (1998). By representing the oral story one is told in a more "literate" format, is there an implied, albeit unintentional, criticism of the oral storytelling structure, or is one simply preparing the message for a different audience? Stevenson (1999) critiqued the writers of oral histories, "Perhaps this (focus on literacy) accounts for their focus on transcripts rather than the actual tellings. Perhaps also they mistakenly believe that treating the spoken word like a document elevates its value and status" (p. 31). Are theatre, film, and video more appropriate means of representing oral storytelling? I have often thought that I would like to write a piece of academic writing with embedded audio files in place of participant quotations. Then the reader could become the storylistener with the click of a mouse. Then you could hear the way Dennis laughs, and feel his joy in living. Then you could hear the sound of the living, resisting Cree language resonate from your speakers and not wonder at how to pronounce *sâkihiwêwin* or *wîcihitowin.* Then again, I suppose trying to capture stories or words of a language in digital audio is similar to our attempts to capture stories in writing because we have a false trust in the permanence of the written word, and little faith in the strength of our memories and living voices to keep the stories alive (King, 2005).

Language Learning and Healing

While there are many projects to teach Cree to people of all ages, I am not aware of any research on the intentional use of language learning as a form of healing, through the regaining of cultural identity and a renewed sense of self and belonging. Mary Isabelle Young (2004) carried out a narrative inquiry into language as identity in which she invited two Aboriginal youth, one who did not speak *Anishinabemowin*, and one who did, to share their stories. It would be interesting to extend that research by providing the non-speaker in Young's study with an opportunity to learn her Aboriginal language and to reflect on that process, and examine how her story of herself might change.

Sarah Whitecalf, a mono-lingual Cree Elder whose lectures were recorded, translated, and published, spoke of the importance of knowing the Cree language for identity:

> I am an old woman, I am approaching seventy. I never went to school, I never set foot in a school, and because of that I am truly a Cree, I am truly a Cree woman… I am very pleased and I would thank you if you tried not to let go of our Creeness, the Cree language (Wolfart & Ahenakew, 1993, pp. 28-29).

Dennis speaks repeatedly to the importance of knowing the Cree language, and he believes it was easier for him to find his way because he still knew his Cree language. It would be interesting to interview youth before and after they took intensive language training, in a culturally-appropriate context, to learn about how this might affect their attitudes, behaviour, and sense of identity and belonging.

Contribution to Counselling Practice

The present research study does not provide answers so much as questions. For me it is certainly a case of the more I learn the less I know. Perhaps the study is an invitation to "not know," and a reminder that not-knowing is a wise place to begin our

journeys with clients and communities. It was the belief that white people knew what was best for Aboriginal people, and the misguided desire to help them by taking their children away from them and forcing them into residential schools, that led to a lack of nurturance, loneliness, fear, and trauma for so many children, with the effects rippling through the generations. Perhaps it is best to heed the Cree teachings as described by Elder Maria Linklater and remember that, "the Creator gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason" (R. Roberts, personal communication, November 26, 2007). We need to listen, remain open, and nurture the ethical spaces we can in partnership with Aboriginal people, and remember that it is the Elders who are the first counsellors in Aboriginal communities.

Dennis' story highlights issues of concern for many Aboriginal persons and it also reminds us how important it is to focus on the strengths and resiliency of our clients. Common concerns include issues of loss of self, struggles with identity and belonging, and the intergenerational effects of the residential school system, such as attachment issues, loss of parenting skills, violence, abuse, trauma, addictions, and suicidal thoughts and behaviour. If we contextualize these problems as the ill-effects of colonization, residential school, and the fourth world experience of Aboriginal people, we will avoid a simple focus on individual pathology. According to Hanson and Hampton (2000), research tends to emphasize the negative effects residential school attendance has had on the mental health of former students, such as "stress, depression, substance abuse, suicide, parenting difficulties, and acculturation (Irwin & Roll, 1995; Morissette, 1994)" (p. 128), but there is little research on the "strengths Aboriginal peoples possess which have allowed them to survive the residential school

genocide" (p. 128). Hanson and Hampton studied the strengths that sustained First Nations peoples in Saskatchewan residential schools by conducting 1½-3 hour qualitative interviews with six former residential school students aged 53-82. They identified the following strengths: autonomy of will and spirit, sharing, respect, acceptance, spirituality, humour and compassion, and pride in being First Nations. The authors of the study also recommended that we guard against "perpetuating a …'colonization' mentality if mental health and healing efforts are filtered through a Western, non-Native paradigm (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997)" (p. 128).

Dennis speaks of the importance of traditional culture and spirituality in his healing. It is important to also keep in mind how difficult it was for him to access this as a resource for healing due to the fear that was instilled in him by the Roman Catholic teachings about mortal sin and eternal damnation. Dennis recalls,

> People would tell me, "Why don't you go back to your culture?", but I didn't even know what they meant. I had to relearn my own culture. The Roman Catholic influence was still so strong. They told us our culture was savage, and it still scared me to think we might be praying to Satan, because that's what they taught us in residential school. Eventually I started going to traditional ceremonies, but sometimes I would need to be half cut to go.

Dennis speaks repeatedly about allowing the people in a group who have been drinking to remain and acknowledging their voices, and he has given me food for thought:

> There was one guy who came to my focus group. I'll always remember this guy. I decided to let him attend the group, even though he had been drinking, because I figured that was the only way he could be there and express himself. Otherwise he wouldn't have come. He never made any trouble. It wasn't the bottle talking, I told him, it was his voice we were hearing. I told him how I used to need to be half cut to sing, or to dance with a woman. I told him I used to need to be half cut in order to be brave, so I knew what that was like.

There is an assumption in the addictions field that people need to deal with their addictions first before they "open up a can of worms" and delve into underlying trauma and loss. It is doubtful an individual will benefit much from healing work of any sort if they are blacked out and unable to even recall the experience, but hearing Dennis' story leads me to reconsider some of my previous assumptions and I remain open and curious to explore this area further.

In regards to counsellor preparation, while it is important to "not know," it is also important to remain open to learning all we can about Aboriginal culture and traditional approaches to healing and health. Making an effort to learn some of the language of our clients can give us a glimpse into their culture and worldview. Dennis' story illustrates the key concepts of an Aboriginal model of health and healing proposed by Hunter, Logan, Goulet, and Barton (2006). In their study of the ways in which urban Aboriginal persons use healing traditions to address their health issues, they identified three major categories: *following a cultural path*, *gaining balance*, and *the circle of life*. Following a cultural path related to losing culture through assimilation and the residential school experience and regaining culture by "learning about traditional ceremonies and becoming a part of Aboriginal culture" (p. 17). The participants named a range of traditional practices including, "drumming, talking circles, sweat lodges, the sacred pipe, stories, healers, and smudging…[and] these traditions offered comfort, peace, and balance…[and] reconnected [them] with the Creator" (p. 17). Gaining balance related to the four equally-powerful aspects of health: spiritual health, emotional health, mental health, and physical health. The circle of life described the importance of relationships, sharing, and learning with the

help of counsellors and Elders, and included openness to sharing this cultural knowledge with others including non-Aboriginal health care professionals. The authors of the study describe the holistic healing model that came out of their study and depict this visually (see Figure 1 in Appendix C). The model is a helpful one to keep in mind as we work with Aboriginal clients.

Similarly to learning all that we can about Aboriginal models of healing, we can learn all that we can about disabilities and the experience of persons with disabilities. Marks (1999) urged counsellors to get out of their offices and come alongside persons with disabilities as allies. For a comprehensive introduction to the experience of spinal cord injury I refer the reader to Wilder's (2006) book, *Wheeling and Dealing: Living With Spinal Cord Injury*. Wilder interviewed 32 men and women with spinal cord injuries and documented research into various aspects of this experience. The study included only two participants of Native American ancestry.

Undoubtedly as we navigate the similarities and differences between ourselves and our clients, we will all stumble and offend, and people will feel angry at us. I have learned that these experiences may put up walls or they may open doors. The choice is ours, if we stay present and respectful, come back bearing the gifts we possess, and care to listen and learn.

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APPENDIX A: Ethics Approval Certificates

University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board (Behavioural)
Room 306 Kirk Hall
117 Science Place
SASKATOON SK S7N 5C9

Investing in Kids

MAR 30 2007

STATUS REPORT FORM

This form is submitted for the following purpose

__XX__ Annual status report

___ Notice of study closure When was the ethics approval for this study due to expire? Expiry Date: _____

The ongoing review requirement stipulates that a status report must be submitted within the one year anniversary date of Renewal Date Apr 1/07

Report Prepared by: Dr. Jennifer J. Nicol Date: March 21/07

1. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Dr. Jennifer A.J. Nicol

2. DEPARTMENT/DIVISION
Educational Psychology and Special Education

3. BeH/BSC #
BEH# 06-69

4. TITLE OF STUDY
Coming to Terms With Disability and Loss: a Narrative Study of Adjustment to Quadriplegia

5. SPONSOR (where applicable)
Unfunded

6. BRIEF SUMMARY OF PROGRESS OF STUDY (projected completion date for recruitment and data collection, number of subjects admitted to date, target enrollment, anticipated end-date).

-Single research participant signed informed consent July 06; Data collection completed October 06; analysis and writing up the results expected completion July 07; anticipated end date September 07

7. ARE THERE ANY ASPECTS OF THIS STUDY WHICH SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF THE BeH-REB (i.e. Was there any difficulty implementing the project as planned, were there any complaints from research participants or did they experience any unexpected emotional distress? Were there any other ethical concerns)? Note: Please attach additional pages as needed.

Participant reported no emotional distress from participation in study; reported to student researcher that participation was actually therapeutic

8. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Signature: _____ Date: March 29/07

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS: This status report is valid for up to one year. The REB will require the submission of an annual status report within one month of the anniversary date. Please note if the Status Report Form is not submitted by the one-year anniversary date, the ethics certificate will automatically be invalidated.

For Administrative Use Only.

Approved On: April 2/07 Expiry Date: 31-Mar-2008

Signature of Chair or designate: John Rigby

June 2002

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB)

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR	DEPARTMENT	Beh #
Jennifer J. Nicol	Educational Psychology and Special Education	06-69

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon SK

STUDENT RESEARCHER(S)
Karen Lloyd

SPONSORING AGENCIES
UNFUNDED

TITLE
Coming to Terms With Disability and Loss: a Narrative Study of Adjustment to Quadriplegia

APPROVAL DATE	EXPIRY DATE
21-Apr-2006	31-Mar-2008

APPROVAL OF	APPROVED ON
Have added a photograph release form.	02-Oct-2007

CERTIFICATION
The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the proposed revisions to your study. The revisions were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics_review/

John Rigby, Chair
University of Saskatchewan
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Oct 3/07
Signature Date

Please send all correspondence to:

Ethics Office
University of Saskatchewan
Room 308 Kirk Hall, 117 Science Place
Saskatoon SK S7N 5C8
Telephone: (306) 966-2084 Fax: (306) 966-2069

APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

I want to thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed and share some of your story with me. I want to remind you that you may stop at any time, take as much time as you like to think about the questions or stop the tape if you wish. You don't have to answer any question you are uncomfortable with. If there is something you want to say at any point during the interview, feel free to share it. I have some questions to guide the interview, but feel free to add whatever you think is important.

I will keep everything we talk about private and confidential. You will have a chance to look at the transcripts I type up, which will be a record of what you say, word for word. I will give you a copy of the transcript for each interview. You can check it over and make any changes or clarify anything that you said or what you meant**. I want to remind you that your participation in this study is voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw at any time. Do you wish to withdraw from the study at this time?**

- General question to start: I'm interested to hearing about your life, especially your life as an Aboriginal man living with quadriplegia. "Where would you start this story?" (Listen and facilitate with more questions such as "What is the next part in your story?" "What came next?" "How did this change your life story?" "Where is this story going?" "How might it end?" "What do you hope for the future of your story?" etc).

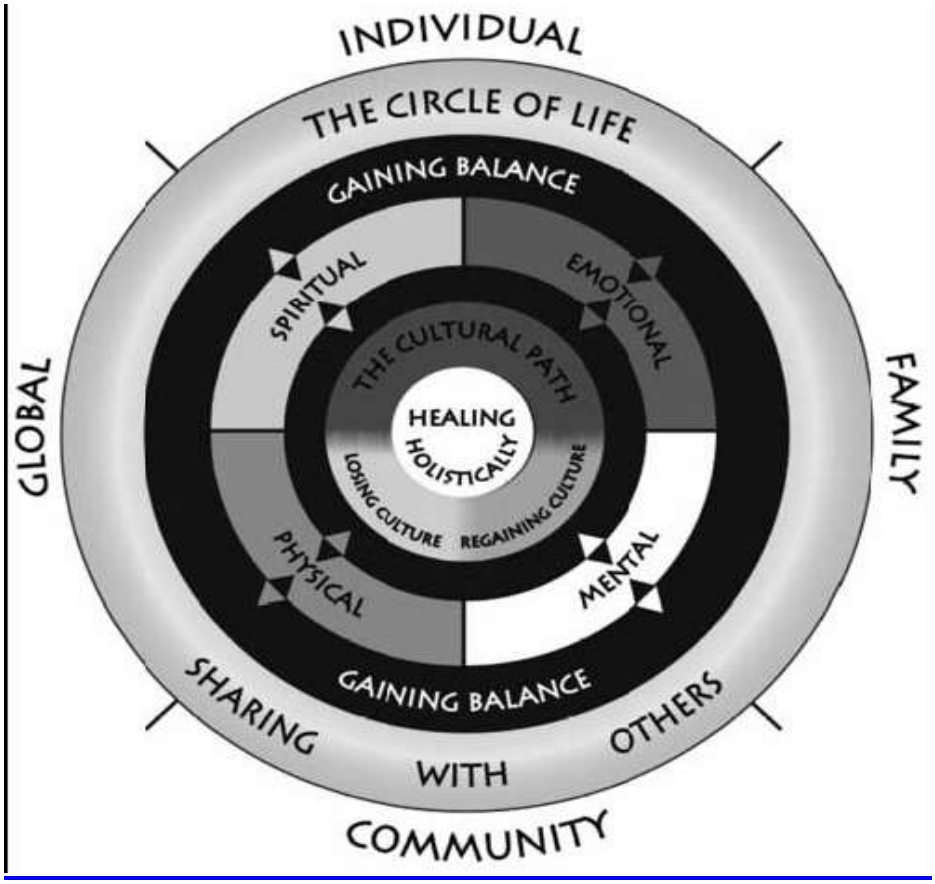
- Content: I will be listening for and prompting with questions if it is not spontaneously shared. I will be looking for:

1. The nature of his disability
2. Life prior to acquiring a disability
3. Description of life immediately following the accident
4. Description of his process of recovery; some of the steps along the way to recovering; how he coped and adjusted
5. How he makes sense of what happened. How his life changed. How he changed. Any learnings or insights or new understandings
6. Meaning of being an Aboriginal person with a disability
7. Impact of Native culture and spirituality on his life with a disability
8. Identifying important influences in life (e.g., people, activities, beliefs, resources, etc.)

- Finish interview with question: Is there anything you would like to add? Anything you didn't talk about that you thought you would? And then ask him to give a title to his life story.

APPENDIX C: Model of Aboriginal Healing

Figure 1



Healing Holistically
Model of Aboriginal Healing: Regaining Balance and Culture

Hunter, Logan, Goulet, & Barton (2006), p. 19
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APPENDIX D: Cree Glossary

iskwêw	woman
ka-wanisinin	You will get lost.
kimiwan	raindrops; literally "it rains"
kinanâskomitinâwâw kahkiyaw kâ-pê-wîcihiyêk	I give thanks to all of you who helped me.
kohkom	your grandmother
maskosis	Little Bear
maskotêw-askiy-yôtin	prairie wind
mikisiw-pimihâw	Flying Eagle, literally "the eagle flies"
nehiyow	the Cree Nation
ôtê nîkân	the future
nimosôm	my grandfather; "my *mosôm*" is a mixture of English and Cree
nohkom	my grandmother; "my *kohkom*" is a mixture of English and Cree
okimotisk	thief
oskâpêwis	Elder's helper, apprentice
otâcimowin	his story/her story
papâmâcihow-âcâhk	wandering spirit
pâstâhosiw	he brings retribution on himself
pâstâhowin or pâstâmowin	curse; "the process through which people antagonize spirit beings or other humans by diverse acts of commission or omission and thus reflexively

	provoke misfortune" (Brightman, 1993, p.103)
sâkâstêw	sunrise
sâkihiwêwin	love
wâkâyôsis	Little Bear (brown)
wîcihitowin	partnership, mutual respect, and helping one another

APPENDIX E: List of Photographs

Photograph 1: p. 49
Dennis' paternal grandparents, his uncle and his father
Left to right: Louise Okimaw (Thunderchild), Andrew, Patrick (Dennis' father), Peter Okimaw (Lucky Man)

Photograph 2: p.59
Dennis and his '67 Pontiac Parisienne in Alberta

Photograph 3: p. 83
Dennis in rehab in Saskatoon; brother Kelly Kennedy (photo consent received)

Photograph 4: p. 103
Dennis at his desk

Photograph 5: p.129
Master of Aboriginal Social Work graduation, 2007 (courtesy Cornerstone Photography)