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## *Teaching(s) From Dis-ease: Grieving, Teaching and Surrender*

*Ramona Elke  
Simon Fraser University*

### **Abstract:**

This work is a conversation with my fears and wonder in the early days of the COVID pandemic, in which I had to live and work as a high school teacher, parent, scholar and artist. Through the weaving of my poems, paintings and life writing in an Indigenous Métissage, I reached for the teachings I have learned from my Elders and Ancestors, longing to find ways to stay human during those most inhumane days, when dis-ease was worsened by social injustice. Through the refracted world of the pandemic came the distressing news of recoveries of unmarked graves at the sites of former residential schools for Indigenous children. This news re-wrote me, unwound me, and re-routed the direction I longed to go to make learning spaces better for youth. Through poetic inquiry, I attempted to process these findings and asked Creator and All My Relations, how to be useful to the work of healing in this dis-ease.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Métissage; poems; poetic inquiry; Indigenous research; pandemic

## Enseignements tirés de la maladie : Le deuil, l'enseignement et l'abandon

### Résumé :

Ce travail est une conversation avec mes inquiétudes des premiers jours de la pandémie liée à la COVID-19 au cours desquelles j'ai dû vivre et travailler en tant qu'enseignante au lycée, ainsi qu'en tant que parent, universitaire et artiste. En tissant mes poèmes, mes peintures et mes récits de vie dans un métissage autochtone, je me suis tournée vers les enseignements que j'ai reçus de mes aînés et de mes ancêtres, cherchant à trouver un moyen de rester humaine pendant ces jours les plus inhumains, lorsque la maladie était aggravée par l'injustice sociale. Dans le monde réfracté de la pandémie, j'ai appris la nouvelle bouleversante de la découverte de tombes anonymes sur les sites d'anciens pensionnats pour les enfants autochtone. Cette nouvelle m'a transformée, m'a libérée et a redéfini la direction que je voulais prendre pour améliorer les espaces d'apprentissage des jeunes. Par le biais d'une enquête poétique, j'ai tenté de traiter ces découvertes et j'ai demandé au Créateur et à toutes mes relations comment contribuer au travail de guérison de cette maladie.

**Mots clés :** métissage autochtone; poèmes; enquête poétique; recherche autochtone; pandémie

## Me and All My Human Relations

**A** *aniin. Boozhoo. Tansi.* I identify my Ancestors as Anishinaabe/Métis from my mother and Celtic/Germanic from my father. I come from strong folx<sup>1</sup> who have survived times such as these: the Great Depression, the Potato Famine, attempted erasure and genocide. They prepared me, through my DNA, to thrive in the aftershock of difficult times. I send a prayer of gratitude to these Ancestors,<sup>2</sup> to the lands and waters, and to All My Relations.<sup>3</sup> I am a *Nookomis* (grandmother), mother and poet. I am an artist, spirit walker and dreamer. I am a teacher and a learner—a student of life, ceremony and all of creation. I work in a high school in British Columbia, Canada, located on the traditional lands and waters of the Katzie and Kwantlen peoples. I teach grades 11 and 12: English First Peoples 11 and 12, and BC First Peoples 12, leaning into the Indigenous pedagogies of drumming, singing, weaving, beading and story work. The youths are a mix of small city urban- and rural dwellers, with connections to the local lands and waters through their out-of-school land-based activities (mountain biking, hunting, fishing, hiking, canoeing and so on). Many of the youths with whom I work have been categorized as having “learning challenges”<sup>4</sup> and are those who make up most of our school district’s trades programs. They are often identified as “challenging” in our school community and, as such, were some of the youths who were the most profoundly impacted by the trauma of the separation caused by the pandemic in all its stages.

I have been taught (by Absolon & Willett, 2005; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008; among others) to introduce myself in this way, so that I may locate myself to those around me with whom I walk. This beginning in reciprocity creates a relationship of connection between you and me, and all beings and Ancestors around us, who bring us teachings and prepare us to walk together in this work. It is an invitation for reciprocal engagement in the work, so we may connect in times of separation.

## A Métissage of Surrender

Through my daily morning writing practice, I tracked the approach of this pandemic and the anxieties and griefs that accompanied it. Re-tracing those days, through Indigenous Métissage,

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<sup>1</sup> The *x* in folx indicates that I am making space in the conversation for all peoples, genders, identities. The *x* leaves space for everyone.

<sup>2</sup> I capitalize the *A* in *Ancestor* to honour the ones who have come before me and show them deep respect for all they have taught me and brought me to so I may learn how to walk in a good way.

<sup>3</sup> *All My Relations* is a term used to describe all beings around us, from the perspective of my Anishinaabe Ancestors. Other Indigenous peoples have other ways of describing these beings which include the more-than-human beings from Spirit and beyond Earthly worlds.

<sup>4</sup> I have placed the term “learning challenges” in quotation marks, because, to me, this is a colonial label created to categorize students who have ways of knowing and being that are not addressed in the Western, colonial school system or curriculum. My youngest son is one of these folx. This term does not lift up the gifts of these youths but problematizes and pathologizes their ways of being, knowing and doing. Their ways of being, knowing and doing offer pathways to healing rather than serve as indicators of a lack of capacity, as suggested by colonial curricular structures. These folx have been some of my greatest teachers.

braiding poetic inquiry, life writing and images, this essay reveals a curriculum of surrender<sup>5</sup>—the teachings I gleaned from those early days. Through poetry, life writing and painting, I reflect upon the grief of separation from all the dear folk I walked with daily, the grief of wit(h)nessing (Lichtenberg-Ettinger, 1999) my youngest son breaking down in anguish after his high school graduation ceremony was cancelled, the grief of watching news of violence on the streets of cities, cutting down Black lives (see Harvard University School of Law, 2023), and, later, the grief from hearing stories of unmarked graves being located at residential school sites (see Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). My poems taught me how to live with all that was out of my control and to act on what I had long believed about the importance of living in gratitude for the spiritual and mental well-being of my family, myself and the youths with whom I walked. In this work, I weave elements of my life with discussions regarding the teachings I was gifted, and I share the moments of surrender and grace I stumbled into, and was steadied by, when I re-membered the teachings of my Ancestors.

As a methodology, Indigenous Métissage differs from other forms of métissage work in that it consciously brings in ethical relationality and Indigenous understandings of reciprocity and respect for the work, the teachings provided by the work and the relationship between the reader, the writer and all beings in-between. As an Indigenous scholar, I must honour and acknowledge all the teachings and teachers living in the liminal spaces between the threads of the weaving of this work, the breaths in the pauses of my words, and the pixels in the colours of my images.

I am honoured to walk in the footsteps of inspirational scholars (such as Cynthia Chambers, Vicki Kelly, Carl Leggo, Dwayne Donald, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Celeste Snowber, Barbara Bickel, Kathryn Ricketts, just to name a few) who have cleared the path for me to wander in the work of métissage—a counternarrative to the grand narrative of our times, a site for writing and surviving in the interval between different cultures and languages, particularly in colonial contexts; a way of merging and blurring genres, texts, and identities; an active literary stance, political strategy, and pedagogical praxis. (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 9)

Papachase Cree scholar, Dwayne Donald (2012), adds ethical relationality to the above idea of métissage:

One central goal of doing Indigenous Métissage is to enact ethical relationality as a philosophical commitment. Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other. (p. 535)

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<sup>5</sup> For me, surrender is the letting go of resistance and fear in situations where we have little or no control of what is happening around us. Initially, I do resist . . . out of anxiety and confusion . . . until I realize that fear and resistance is neither helpful nor healthy. The course, or curriculum, of surrender at this time was, for me, the only course. I needed to learn to let go and trust that my Ancestors would guide me through this. They had lived through times like these and I needed to trust that wisdom if I was to be any use to my family, the youths around me and to myself. I needed to learn to spot the “medicines” (those actions, ceremonies and people who are healing) so I could share them with others or model ways to help others find their own medicines.



healing  
or dealing  
or death.

we are here now,  
timidly pushing aside the overgrowth  
to step into the clearing,  
clinging to the erroneous thinking  
that we need not be changed  
by this clarion call from our Mother,  
while we bomb and burn  
and break our grandchildren's hearts  
with our inability to release our addiction to having.

I am praying harder than ever today,  
to the *click* of changing channels  
and memories of the apocalypses  
we continually fail to learn from.

I am praying right now.

(March 14, 2022)

### **Writing to Right Myself: Living the *Artist's Way***

Morning Pages are three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing, done first thing in the morning. \*There is no wrong way to do Morning Pages\*—they are not high art. They are not even “writing.” They are about anything and everything that crosses your mind—and they are for your eyes only. Morning Pages provoke, clarify, comfort, cajole, prioritize and synchronize the day at hand. Do not over-think Morning Pages: just put three pages of anything on the page . . . and then do three more pages tomorrow.

(Cameron, 2024, n.p.)

Thirty years ago, I began writing Morning Pages and wrote faithfully for seven years, took a ten-year hiatus, returning to it in 2016, and adding poetry to the morning ritual. This practice of life writing, from Julia Cameron's 1992 work, *The Artist's Way*, was suggested to me by my counsellor, in 1992, as a way to find healing and meaning for my childhood traumas. These Pages became the site of many creative works, as well as revelations of where I needed to go to create the life I longed to live, in a way that would allow me to be the human I was born to be. I am grateful for the introduction of this practice into my daily life, especially looking back to those deep pandemic days, when I scrambled to collect myself before heading into a classroom that was, often, the only place of calm for the youths and adults with whom I work. Over the Covid-19 isolation years, this practice kept me together when I witnessed others falling apart. These Pages provided me with a courageous, safe place to bring my worries, my grief and my frustrations, so I could keep them from leaking out sideways onto students, colleagues and my family. Figure 1 shows my first painting in the first year of the pandemic.



Figure 1. Sockeye Salmon Woman.  
Water colour, Prismacolor pencils and ink. 8 ½" x 11". By the author.

### **Snagging Moments: Places in My Works That Held Me**

Looking back over my writing from the first years of the pandemic, I have noticed there are jagged pieces which have caused me to pause. They are, indeed, fractures of the moments of living in this strangeness. Some entries speak to living in a world clouded in the fear of the virus; some muse on the fall-out of our ways of dealing with the panic; some express dis-ease surfacing from the “discovery”<sup>7</sup> of unmarked graves outside of Indian Residential Schools.

What follows is a collection of fragments—those memories from my morning writing, as well as poems and paintings, which hold me still (in all the ways of *now* and *motionlessness*). The poems and paintings are the ground in which I dig, my sites of prayerful excavation and interrogation, allowing me to “stand in the presence of creation with open arms and a burning heart” (Leggo, 2015, p. 152). Creating the above painting, Sockeye Salmon Woman, grounded me in local Katzie stories of survival and how we have been in these days of dis-ease before, surviving with the help of our plant and animal relatives.

### **Living in the Virus**

The early days of the pandemic did not overly worry me. My Pages reveal the first mention of schools closing in other school districts, the cancellation of gatherings/conferences, and the realization that my anxiety itself could affect my immunity to disease.

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<sup>7</sup> I have placed this in quotation marks because we Indigenous peoples have long asserted that little ones were there. This was not a discovery for us.

## Morning Pages

March 12, 2020: *Everything is getting cancelled. Conferences, large gatherings, lots of stuff. It is a little unsettling now. Airlines are giving refunds, Airbnb's are giving refunds, gatherings are giving refunds. It is really freaky, for sure. . . Given that I am travelling in a few days, I am feeling a little freaked out, but it is what it is. This whole thing is going for the next 6 months or more. Time to just buckle in and be cool. . . Of course, the other piece to this is that any anxiety about this will lower my immunity and increase my likelihood of getting sick with anything because I have so much cortisol in my system, it's killing my immune system. The trick is to chill out! Get sleep, drink water, take my vitamins, and relax!*

I try to talk myself off the ledge with these words. (How funny I thought it would be over in six months!) I was not about to change my plans to visit my daughter, who was attending Carleton University, at the time. I was very excited to see her and to return to Ottawa.

By the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020, my daughter was told to evacuate her dorm. Things began to get *real* from there. I cancelled my trip on the 16<sup>th</sup> and, on the 17<sup>th</sup>, she arrived home at 11:30 at night. At the same time, my oldest son was on his way to Las Vegas. He was forced to turn around the day he arrived. Everything was shutting down. We were all worried about the two of them coming home safely and not getting locked down in far-away places. I remember not being able to breathe properly until they were home.

## The Harvest From Holding in Place

The lock-down gifted me with the time to reflect on the moments, before the pandemic hit, when I was struggling to be the best version of myself: the version needed to heal others, not wound them. I was struggling with a group in one of my classes and my heart was hurting because I knew I was not at my best with them. Through my time to write and reflect, I began to see that I had lost sight of my teachings from my Ancestors about how it is my responsibility to *do good*—not just to *do no harm*, but to bring goodness to the spaces where I walked. I began to ask myself: What do I want to remember about these days, so I don't forget later? I prayed this question into my Pages and this stream of consciousness poem came forward. It illustrates the fragmented way I was experiencing the world at that time.

*what do I want to remember?*

what do I want to remember now so I don't forget later when we get back into our old routines and old ways, like we always do, blind and blinded by the teachings we learned in times of crisis and promptly forgot because our memories are really good—just very short. our hindsight blinds our foresight to any other way but the old way to protect our fears of change and transformation in any real way outside of our personal comfort zones of narrowness, getting, and having, and shut down in survival mode for me and mine instead of ours and we begin to feel how we don't know what we've got 'til it's gone, nearly gone, threatening to go, forced to go . . . fading into memory like a bedtime story.

what do I want to remember now, so I don't forget later, about the holes in my heart where my life used to be, in the faces, places, and spaces I assumed would always be parts of my life I only ever wanted when I wanted it and now that I can't have it I want it even more? how scarcity increases value exponentially and oppositional defiance demands I demand everything I am freed to distance myself from in a dance of life and/or death forced on me like drunk relatives at a wedding.

I gotta list it . . . what I don't want to forget when this reign of terror is over, so I live every other day like this one when I reach out, with aching arms stretching so far as to dislocate my shoulders, to the people, places, spaces, and ways of being stolen by this life I never wanted.

I gotta list it so I never forget to remember this feeling . . . this yearning to be better, do better, be there for whomever . . . again.

(March 27, 2020)

This time allowed me to ask myself: "What would I regret doing or saying if I couldn't go back and fix the damage I have done?" I was allowed to reflect upon how mindlessness wounds.

### *Morning Pages*

*April 2, 2020: I have been learning how to move in the world more mindful of my place in it and how my footsteps can profoundly damage the beings in my path . . . intentionally or unintentionally. . . The same goes for the G block boys. I had no sense of humour with them, and I wasted precious time [that could have been used] getting to know them and love them. Now that the school year is over, some of them I won't get to see again. It breaks my heart to know that I lost that much time. It's good to consider this as a new part of my practice: what if schools closed for months and there was no way to see these kids again? What would I regret doing or saying or being if that was my last impression? What impression—what energy—do I want to leave them with? How do I want them to remember our time together? That is just good teaching life, really. What's the energy you want people to be left with?*

I had forgotten that I knew better. At this point in my career (in my 19<sup>th</sup> year), I had lost several students to car accidents, suicide and overdose, leaving jagged, torn holes in my heart. I forgot to remember to know better, to do better, to be better, in case those last few days were our last few days. My heart hurt so much to not be able to apologize to those I've tripped over in my walk to be something I wasn't, in the pursuit of a version of legitimacy in the eyes of my colleagues, a version I never, truly, wanted.



Figure 2. Medicine Bear.  
Water colour, Prismacolor pencils and ink. 8 ½ x11". By the author.

### Finding the Faith to Surrender

In the early days of June, 2020, when the cancelled graduation and commencement ceremonies would have taken place, marking the passage to the next phase of the senior students' lives (my youngest son among them), I was back in our classroom. The weight of the emptiness of the space crashed down upon me. I needed to wander around in the wondering of ways to step out of fear and into faith that my Ancestors, my teachings and the universe would show me how to manage all this sorrow. I later wrote about that moment in the room, alone, weeping for the ones who had come into my heart.

#### Morning Pages

*June 9, 2020: I had a breakdown cleaning out the Grade 12 folders. They deserve so much more than what they are able to have for grad. My heart is broken for them and for me for the loss of this gregarious, fun group of seniors. For the silence it will bring in this walk.*

In my house, we all took our turn with our grief at the loss of this important ceremonial day. Of my three children, my youngest has had the most struggle in school and deserved this moment, I think, the most. My son and his closest group of friends walked by the river, put down tobacco and cried together, creating closure that spoke to them. Today, when we talk about that year, he says he is grateful he and his friends had their own ceremony—it has meant more to him than being involved in an acknowledgement from a place that, truly, couldn't see him. This sets my heart at ease.

The summer progressed. I taught summer school (in person), grateful for the energy of the youths after the pain of separation. I began by telling them how grateful I was to see them and to work with them face-to-face. We drummed and sang, and I read stories to heal them. I found footing

## *Grieving, Teaching and Surrender*

in this work, reminding me how much I love what I do. The painting *Medicine Bear* (Figure 2) represents those healing stories and practices—medicines—helping me to be who I needed to be for the young ones and for myself. The following poem attempted to capture my gratitude for the medicine we bring to each other:

### *untitled*

we became beautiful through arrival from the stars  
singing songs of peace from pieces of ourselves fully dreamed  
but not yet seen  
through eyes filled with starlight  
and hearts made of hopes we collected  
when we had forgotten we are perfect.

that's how it always seems to go:  
doubt drowns out our Ancestors' voices—  
one more separation from perfection  
and the realization that we carry life into dying places,  
people of the resurrection,  
who love the world back into wholeness  
because someone had to do it.

so, we are here!  
hear our words!

when the stars stop singing,  
love pieces us back together.

(July 14, 2020)

## *Dreaming Into a New Future*

With summer school finished, I had time to reflect upon the pressing reality of beginning a new school year in a quarter system.<sup>8</sup> This new 2020/21 school year invited me into rich opportunities to reflect upon my practice and to dream into the possibilities for the coming year. I was excited! My Pages and a poem from that time reveal my searching for ways into the next school year, ways which would honour and put into action the discoveries and teachings revealed to me during my reflections when we worked from home.

### *Morning Pages*

*August 13, 2020: The time has come—during this era of great change—to dismantle the old, harmful ways and co-create something healing and beautiful with the young ones, so that we all learn together how to live in love and respect with each other and All Our Relations. I need to lean into where my heart hurts for youth—where I feel most battered when I entered the*

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<sup>8</sup> The quarter system is a division of a high school year into four terms (quarters) of ten weeks each. This was a way of staying flexible if we needed to leave the classroom and resume on-line learning when COVID numbers spiked in the schools.

*spaces—and that's where I will find the rub . . . the questions and focus—the itches that won't be scratched. That's where the research lives. That's where I will find my work.*

*on the verge*

all of those other questions seemed to be right there  
at my fingertips,  
brushing the ends of them  
so I could shimmy them out of the centre  
and into my grasp.

but now there is only shimmering,  
no shimmying,  
as I stare into the centre,  
looking for clarity,  
until my eyes ache and become sticky  
with having been forced open so long  
without blinking.

what are those precious pieces of ourselves we hold so dearly  
that we feel the need to flay them  
and wear their skins  
until they fall from our bodies  
in various stages of rot.

or fall from us  
from the strain of misfitting  
                                  or mal-fitting  
                                  or deforming

ourselves as we are misshapen  
to fit these skins—  
because certainty feels better  
than the discomfort of authenticity?

I just don't know what those skins are,  
universally,  
so that people—  
like me—  
or not like me—  
have permission to live in their skin,  
however it fits,  
without the shame of misfitting  
                                  or mal-fitting  
                                  or deforming  
ourselves to fit the glass slipper  
like the stepsisters in Aschenputtel—

the *Deutsche* version of Cinderella  
I learned was more honest than Disney.

how many pieces of ourselves do we feel compelled  
to lob off to fit the glass slipper,  
just to feel as worthy as our petite,  
more “beautiful” stepsister?  
Stepsister!?  
. . . we’re not even related . . .  
self-mutilation on the way to relation.

maybe that’s it:  
self-mutilation on the way to relation.  
desperation for connection—  
the scalpel  
the hacksaw  
the guillotine of Spirit  
to shape us into what is valued  
and “acceptable”.

if we do this to each other as adults,  
what are we doing to the children?

(August 21, 2020)

## Living It

We all did our best in our own ways. Some folx let their anxieties leak out sideways onto the youths around them. Youths would come into the space I created with my colleagues so they could heal from those leaking people and places. We began every day we could with our drums, in song, on the field under a maple tree. We walked on the days there was no rain. We made time to weave, to honour our exhaustion, and we tried our best to model for the youths how to take care of ourselves in those challenging days. If we were feeling overwhelmed by the screaming energy in the building, we acknowledged it and brewed pots of tea. At one point, though, in late October, the first case of COVID in our school appeared in our classroom community. I was feeling what *a thousand-yard stare*<sup>9</sup> represents. The next day, I wrote this poem:

### *1000-yard stare*

I know what a thousand-yard stare feels like.  
I’ve seen it many times in my own eyes  
as a child too touched by burning hands  
as a young woman crossing battlelines for my body’s rights  
as a mother sleep deprived,

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<sup>9</sup>In a blogpost on battle trauma, Stolt (2021) offers this description: “Soldiers call it *the thousand-yard stare*—the tell-tale sign that one’s senses have become so overloaded by prolonged fear and trauma that the nervous system can’t process any more. They are no longer looking at you in the here and now. They’re looking *through* you into the distance, toward something far beyond—be it heaven or hell. Or maybe a little bit of both” (para. 1).

deprived of my own nourishment  
while I nourished others from the centre of my own bones

I did that as a teacher, too.

but this:

this walking on my hands on the edges of everything,  
one hand tied behind my back by the pain of separation,  
this is beyond all measure of reasonable expectation  
for any human being to manage—

this uninvited guest into our space,  
shadowing me with every tentative step—  
on that single, shaky hand,  
hopping along every possible angle  
above plunging gaps in everything I know  
so that every breath feels like I am being water-boarded:  
“advanced interrogation” for crimes I didn’t know I committed.

(October 30, 2020)



Figure 3. Nanabozhoo Teaching the Children to Reach.  
Watercolor, Prismacolor pencils and ink. 8½" x11". By the author.

The painting of Figure 3 illustrates my desire to bring healing practices to the spaces where I walked with youths. I was already exhausted, by governments and school boards pretending that we were not what we were: subjects in an experiment with the sole purpose of keeping the economy going. The only thing that kept me putting one foot in front of the other was the knowledge (through feedback from the youths) that the space we had created was necessary for the holding together of the hearts and spirits of the youths, and for us, too. The following poem reminded me of this.

*wiindigoo killers*

as if anyone cared,  
I still put two feet on the ground,  
walking straight ahead into the promise of light

feet heavy with wishing  
to stop just for a minute to catch my breath  
before the next onslaught,  
the next few yards of punishing incline,  
the next breath of doubt that  
my feet will still choose to carry me forward  
into the incessant danger  
all for the sake of “the economy”—  
that *wiindigoo*<sup>10</sup> *aadizookaanag*,<sup>11</sup>  
*zhaaganash*<sup>12</sup> gaping maw,  
endlessly grinding everything beautiful,  
into a slurry,  
made to keep us all drunk on our desire for wanting.

hopelessness would *wiindigoo* me, too,  
if I didn't know that community chokes the greed out of howling despair  
and medicine lives in the fluorescent glow of our classroom.

the youths care that I still put two feet on the ground;  
*wiindigoo* killers, all.

their medicine helps me walk on.

(Oct. 29, 2020)

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<sup>10</sup> A nightmarish, Anishinaabe spirit being known for consuming without being sated.

<sup>11</sup> The *Anishinaabemowin* word for the powerful spirit beings of our sacred stories. By “*wiindigoo aadizookanaag*” I refer to the sacred stories about *wiindigoo*.

<sup>12</sup> An *Anishinaabemowin* term for “White person”.

## The Most Painful Snag of All



Figure 4. Thunderbird Bringing Home the Children.  
Watercolour and Prismacolor pencils. 15"x22". By the author.

In this conversation of dis-ease, the announcement about suspected unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School lives, for me, within the refractions of this pandemic experience. The above painting, *Thunderbird Bringing Home the Children* (Figure 4), helped me process the pain of these announcements. In the days following the news, I was called into spaces to live the teachings I had been given by my Elders and teachers, carrying ceremony beyond my safe spaces. All I had learned in the previous months created a foundation to keep me steady. I was called to bring medicines out of our classroom and into our school community and, in so doing, was given the opportunity to offer healing for myself and others. This excerpt from my Pages illustrates how the curriculum of surrender informed how I was led to the work called for, in our school community, at this time:

### Morning Pages

June 21, 2021: *And once again, the children lead the way. Lead the way to places where we can flourish as a community . . . a youth came into our room yesterday, introduced himself, and told us that he wanted to join the Canadian Armed Forces after grad. He said, "I love my country, but I am ashamed and saddened by what it has done to Indigenous peoples. I was hoping to organize a memorial, under the flagpole for the children and I wanted to know if that would be ok?"*

We did hold a ceremony on that day. Over 300 students and teachers came outside to drum and sing and hang orange ribbons on our maple trees. It was a beautiful moment in the days of sadness.

I would like to close out this work with two poems from that time.<sup>13</sup> Writing poetry helped me to stay on my feet during those challenging final weeks of June, 2021, when the rest of Canada reeled from further unsettling news. The increasing numbers of reported graves (Eneas, 2021), made me feel as if the spirits of the young ones were flying around me, pulling me to the future I knew I needed to create for their great-grandchildren. Once again, poetry saved me.

The poem *(o)debwewin* came to me in the days following the reports from Kamloops, when folx were coming to me daily (sometimes two or three times in a day) to ask what they could do. I know they were looking for ways to help themselves find their way through this disturbing knowledge—this invitation into the conversation about what Canada was in this new light (not so new for Indigenous folx). People wanted to act, to embody their working this all out. I just wanted people to pause. The following piece speaks to my prayer for them in this work.

*(o)debwewin*<sup>14</sup>

be in your feelings.  
be in your shame  
your horror  
your grief.

be in your feelings.

no one knows how to do any of this.  
not a single one of us knows what to do,  
how to do it, or where to go to hold everything still for one moment;  
to grab hold of anything that is not spinning right now.

be in your feelings.

be in your helplessness,  
your hopelessness,  
your disappointment.

how we walk forward from this will write the future for our grandchildren—  
\*when\* we walk forward from this . . . no matter how long it takes.  
no matter how long it takes each of us to know when we move to the next feeling—  
the next stage.  
the next school.

be in your feelings.  
be in your anger  
your disgust

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<sup>13</sup> I will share them in the order in which they were written.

<sup>14</sup> The Anishinaabemowin word for something like *truth* in English.

your frustration for  
in  
about  
everyone you thought knew better,  
even and especially when "everyone" includes yourself.

we are all grasping  
for answers  
for assurances  
for steady feet.

for medicine  
for comfort  
for justice.

we are all reaching out  
for a life raft  
a helping hand  
a safe place to land so we can fall apart on our own terms  
so we can fall back together on our own terms.

be in your feelings

be in your denial  
your numbness  
your need to feel nothing at all.

be in the place where you put it all away to process later  
so you can be in your feelings when the time comes  
and the spinning slows to milder violence.

it's ok.

this is what a paradigm shift feels like.

this is a good thing. this means the Ancestors are bringing forth the teachings  
buried longer than those little ones.

this is what *(o)debwewin* feels like  
*ode* = heart  
*debwewin* = the sounding of  
*(o)debwewin* = "truth"  
"truth" = the sounding of our heart.

this is what truth feels like  
this is what our hearts sound like  
have sounded like since colonization began.

be in your feelings  
no judgement  
no forcing to move forward quickly.

*Grieving, Teaching and Surrender*

just be in your feelings  
next to me with my feelings.

this is how we shift together.

our elders teach that (*o*)*debwewin* takes a long time to sound clearly  
so we resonate as one—one heart.  
it takes a long time and it hurts.  
a lot  
deeply  
sometimes.

in anger, too  
or disbelief

all those places  
    feelings we sit in  
        walk in  
        fight.

be in your feelings  
learn to honour yourself in them.

cuz  
this is just the beginning.

(Day one, *Ode'imini-giizis*/Heartberry/Strawberry Moon—June 1, 2021)

As I processed these days, this confirmation of what I had always considered to be true, as told by residential school survivors from the beginning of these schools' existence, I kept thinking about the hearts and spirits of the families, of the little ones who were trying to make their way home, and of those of us left behind to face the truth. This poem (and many of the others from this time) was a prayer for strength and courage to keep putting one foot in front of the other during those painful, heavy days. It called me to listen to the teachings of my heart, the courage of my Ancestors, and the ways they had survived this dis-ease from time immemorial. We have been here before: the pandemic, the attempted erasure, the loss of faith. We just had to remember our connection to the hearts of those who have come before us and how they give us the strength to keep going.

*ode*

*ode* walks on broken feet and broken promises—  
so many as to count all those  
little, brown toes digging in the dirt  
    sand  
or soft, wetness on tree trunks  
holding our sorrow,  
slightly less hollow  
than all those *zhaaganashag* promises made to the children,  
in the faces of their Ancestors,  
when those *zhaaganashag* thought no one was looking.

someone is always looking.

*ode* walks on their hands now  
because to keep doing this same walk  
the same way  
is too painful these days  
and maybe our hands can hear better  
when we grab on for dear life,  
to stop our souls from spinning.

*ode* is tired  
but oh, so, strong.  
c'mon!  
let's get our walking stick, *ode*  
and go a little way farther.

that's what our grandparents would do.

(June 3, 2021)



Figure 5.  
Detail, left wing—



Figure 6.  
Detail, right wing—

from *Thunderbird Bringing Home the Children*.  
Watercolour and Prismacolor pencil crayons. 15"x22". By the author.

The paintings accompanying these poems are from my work *Thunderbird Bringing Home the Children*. This work was a vision of how Thunderbird would bring home the little ones from all over Turtle Island, from wherever the next unmarked graves would, inevitably, be found. Creating this painting became another way for me to pray for the little ones and their families, for the communities, for myself. It was another medicine for this dis-ease.

## Living Beyond the Dis-ease: Invitations to Surrender

It is a gross understatement to say that the pandemic years have been gruelling in so many ways. I believe we have been called, as fully Spirited, fully present human beings, to arrive, to become better for ourselves, the land and waters, the young ones and All Our Relations. I have witnessed the impact of greed and disconnection on my loved ones and have felt the impact of this on my own spirit. For me, the only way I could navigate these days of spinning chaos was to write out of this madness, to right myself on the shifting ground underneath me. Through this practice, I was invited to surrender to all I could not control and find ways to reach for wholeness (through life writing, poetry and painting) when the world shattered to pieces around me. I have shared a few pieces of my life writing, poems and paintings, sharing my reflections of the reality refracted through these days of dis-ease. My hope in this sharing is to remove the feeling of isolation in the suffering we have all endured and to offer my words as a humble gift, and acknowledgement that we have never been alone, that we have, and always will, have each other. We are all we have, so we must lift each other up—the young ones are depending on that.

*Chi miigwech* for your breath into this work, your eyes on these words, and your heart in this walk. I am ever grateful for you.

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