

Bowers, R. (2007). Clinical suggestions for honouring Indigenous identity for helpers, counsellors, and healers: The case of 'Marsha', *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), Indigenous Special Issue, 89-104.



## **Clinical suggestions for honouring Indigenous identity for helpers, counsellors, and healers: The case of 'Marsha'**

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### **Abstract**

As a discussion of clinical issues in counselling in an Indigenous and/or multicultural setting, this paper explores issues associated with the healing and integration of race, identity, and empowerment. The issues are highlighted by a case study of a 36 year old, female, lesbian, Indigenous Canadian, immigrant to Australia. A process of values clarification and identity-reframing is discussed through an exercise called 'Opening a Sacred Circle'. This process may be used in creating space for personal and social acknowledgment, healing, and transformation during a time when issues of reconciliation, social justice, and mobilisation of Indigenous peoples requires practical, culturally appropriate, flexible, and sensitive responses to issues faced in a 'post-colonial' environment.

### **Introduction**

Issues associated with the healing and integration of race, identity, and empowerment, along with related problems of prejudice, negative attitudes, and bias are covered extensively in the literature (Atkinson 2003, Brown 1997, Giddens 1991, James and Shadd 1994, MacDonald 1995, Pack-Brown 1999, Robinson 1999, Sarup 1996). The purpose in this clinical discussion paper is not to review the literature. Rather, this paper foregrounds clinical analysis to suggest practical strategies for understanding and working with emotional and social well being in therapy within the contexts where issues of race, identity, and personal empowerment are a large part of the story.

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Like many case studies, the one that follows is a montage brought together from various clinical experiences. We prefer to front up about this fact from the beginning, to allow the reader a sense of the flexibility of case details in illustrating various parts of the picture. Using a montage allows greater flexibility in discussion and illustration, maintains higher levels of confidentiality through the ability to mask personal details, and affords a greater degree of respect, reverence and protection of cultural artefacts and signifiers that could be unintendedly exploited through traditional clinical and anthropological methods.

The approach taken here is therefore constructive and contingent. We resist making general claims to truth that might presume to speak for a wide section of people. Where such claims appear to be made, the reader is asked to immediately become aware that these statements are based on limited clinical observations. Rather than form the basis of future therapy, such observations can be creatively used to make tentative observations. The purpose of this reflexive approach is to facilitate greater flexibility of perception, increased empathic understanding (should the reader ever encounter parallel cases), and deepening spirals of questioning and insight. In psychotherapy we have a small but important window for exploring contingent clinical observations and understandings that are not often afforded space within mainstream discourses. This paper reflects this rather sacred and clinical space of exploration, observation, and tentative formulations.

Based on clinical experience, we have found that the process of growth in identity is crystallised through an analysis of emerging identity over time. In client's stories, the formation of identity appears somewhat fragmented overall, with emerging points of awareness that shape and change self-perception in varying degrees of significance. In the realm of race, culture, and colonisation of Aboriginal Australian and First Nations Canadian people, while awareness of racial origins and cultural identity can often be a pervasive part of one's identity, it remains in many ways problematic. Internalised racism and other forms of prejudicial attitudes play an important part in the fracturing and re-kindling of identity over time (Atkinson 2003).

### **Identity re-member-ing**

These changes can be observed through the individual's recounting of their personal story. Though sometimes this level of analysis does not appear easily, and may only come to light through the therapist's being sensitised to the themes that are related to post-colonial post-trauma recovery. In such cases, it is a sensitive and often difficult process of making careful clinical judgements related to if, how and when to highlight wider socio-historical and political factors that help to explain a client's experience. Nonetheless, such edu-caring interventions appear to be a vital part of assisting disempowered and marginalised client groups to become aware of wider issues that impact on their personal story. In many cases edu-caring interventions appear to relieve the pressure of internalised shame and guilt, and can begin a process of peeling back layers of inter-generational trauma that cover up people's integral and vital spiritual core (Atkinson 2003).

In other rather common 'post-colonial' circumstances (read: negative aspects of colonisation continue in many forms), particularly where the individual is of second or

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third generation mixed racial origins, their primary identity may (or may not) be primarily Indigenous. In many cases, the individual's sense of being Indigenous shifts, changes, and deepens over time, at least in part due to their association and interactions with Indigenous community. The foregrounding, suppression, and/or unintended ignorance and/or lack of conscious awareness of Indigenous identity can each, respectively, have many outcomes and significant meanings for individuals over time.

In other cases, particularly though by no means exclusively with younger client groups, the distance between one's immediate sense of self versus what could be a connected to Indigenous culture and racial identity can cause rifts of self-esteem and crisis of identity. These experiences appear to parallel the narratives of other minority groups (Bowers 2002).

### **Accessing states of wellness**

The clients seen in my practice have described a space like a void, vacuum, black hole, and a wasteland. The common theme in these metaphors is a spiritual energy of disconnection from the core of the self and from the environment. These types of identity crisis may be common to youthful exploration, but overtime, and without the important developmental input of cultural influences such as mentors, teachers, and a resolution found through a sense of belonging, clients who experience chronic disconnection describe a state of alienation and despair. These experiences appear to compromise health and well being over time.

Many writers suggest this space of alienation institutes many of the social problems facing youth and adults in the post-colonial era linked to meaning and crisis in identity (Bandler and Grinder 1982, Baume and Clinton 1997, Green 1996, Laidlaw and Malmo 1990, Plummer 2000, Remafedi 1994, Watt, 1999). These problems are not unique to Indigenous or marginalised contexts. This spiritual disconnection and alienation has infected the whole of Western civilisation, a fact long recognised by secular and religious authorities, certainly since the industrial revolution.

In other cases observed during recent times, clients may have little awareness of their cultural and racial origins. They often feel the need to search out their histories, and we have found ourselves referring people to genealogical sources. Genealogical societies have seen a massive increase in popularity over the past decade. People appear to be seeking a sense of their past during uncertain times, and this energy of unconsciously seeking the 'vision quest' permeates modern social life. I understand the vision quest as a metaphor of youthful initiation where an individual risks independence to seek an inner awareness that will guide future actions, and provide a sort of vision for one's life, and thus have both meaning and purpose.

The aspects of vision quest that Indigenous clients are seeking today relate to a sense of spiritual transcendence or insight that gives resilience and strength to face the troubles of life. This vision quest also seeks a practical and earthed sense of purpose that addresses

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the personal and social problems of the day. In many cases, my approach is to give clients an experiential awareness of creating their own state of connectedness, spiritual awareness, and personal empowerment. Once they have these skills, they are able to generate these states of resourcefulness in their everyday lives. It appears to be important to teach clients how to become grounded in a resourceful personal state of being facilitated through accessing a state of centeredness that is less related to the vastitudes of exterior circumstances.

### **Integration and identity**

Increased adaptability and resilience in the face of uncertainty appears to be related to the formation of integral identity. In marginal contexts where aspects of racism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudicial attitudes play a predominant role personal empowerment parallels a growing awareness of acknowledgement and pride in racial and cultural origins. For many, this process of changing awareness runs in tandem with learning within secular mainstream educational and social systems instituted by colonial powers. This growth in identity and personal awareness involves deconstructing values internalised personally, as well as, over time, forming a means to resist dominant discourses by articulating a different point of view.

Growth in personhood is therefore paradoxical. We grow in relation to the forms of hardship we have faced. Unacknowledged systemic trauma is one important part of the wider picture. These circumstances make up the wider trans-generational contexts of our lives, and form the basis of our soulful quest for relationships rooted in integrity, freedom, and justice.

### **The case study of 'Marsha'**

To illustrate these points let us consider a case study of 'Marsha'. Marsha is Indigenous to Eastern Canada, an area of the continent long impacted by colonial invasion. She is female, aged 36, lesbian, and is living in partnership with an Aboriginal Australian female of 32 years of age. She accepted her lesbian identity at a young age, and her family was and remains extremely supportive of her and her partnership with 'Silvia'. Marsha met Silvia during a dance party in Toronto when she was 26 years old. They fell deeply in love with each other, and each stayed for extended periods of time in either country until Marsha decided to move to Australia permanently.

Marsha is a senior social worker and researcher, and immigrated to Australia at the age of 32 on an employer sponsored visa. She is a driven career woman, highly motivated and insightful about intellectual and social issues. However, she has been plagued by sleepless nights and an indescribable longing for connection that inspired her to seek therapy. She was referred by a university colleague at a partner research institution, and has travelled several hours each two week period for an extended two hour session. She has attended six sessions, and the outcomes of the therapy appear to be a tentative but increasing resolve to acknowledge, enact, and support her emerging sense of identity.

Marsha reports being of Micmac First Nations, French and Irish heritage. She grew up in a small town in New Brunswick, Canada. Her parents were average middle class

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Canadians, one a secretary with the government, and the other a computer developer. She grew up in a largely non-Indigenous cultural environment influenced by different experiences of church, mainstream schooling, and higher education. Her Indigenous heritage came through her grandparents via her mother. This aspect of their family identity had mostly been silent, not discussed, and appeared from her description to be covered over in shame.

English was the language of the family, even though they had lived only sixty miles away from a French Acadian village, and it was common knowledge that many of the French families had intermarried with First Nations families over the years. Through coming to Australia and living with her Indigenous partner and her extended family, Marsha found herself constantly inwardly challenged to acknowledge her own heritage and felt the need to consciously explore her identity for the first time during her life.

### **Opening a sacred circle**

As Marsha's sense of identity appeared to be somewhat multilayered, an idea surfaced during session three to chart or map her current sense of identity in a 'pie diagram'. The symbolism of the exercise became more apparent as we progressed, and related to the deeper spiritual need Marsha felt for connection that suggested that opening a sacred circle may assist her process.

A sacred circle is an ancient and modern ritual that creates spiritual and psychic boundaries for safety in doing personal and spiritual healing, learning, and change work. I have used this approach in psychotherapy with many different clients, and have found the exercise to be most useful with clients recovering from trauma and abuse of various kinds (Bowers 2003). The approach can be adapted to many cultural and religious contexts, as long as the therapist is able to sensitively address client's differences of beliefs and language associated with ritual space, theology, philosophy, and cultural signifiers.

Opening a sacred circle allowed Marsha a place in which she could acknowledge her identity across time and space. She was able to acknowledge her history, to look back at the past, and to view into the future. She felt it important to acknowledge her ancestors, and from this she deepened a sense of the trans-generational issues facing her family and in her own lifetime. In this ritual space clients often feel a sense of personal empowerment and healing by bringing the different parts of self and life together through acknowledgement, honouring, and respecting the truth of their lives in ways that go beyond resistance and self-defeating beliefs. This is not always an easy process, as facing resistance and unresourceful beliefs is hard work. In Marsha's case, even though she claimed a rich cultural and spiritual tradition, during her education she had taken on the secular materialistic values of the academe. Over the years these values formed deep beliefs within her psyche that told her that spiritual exploration and awareness was false and misleading, even dangerous and superstitious. It took time and sensitive, direct discussion of the issues to sort through these conflicts of meaning and identity that were in many ways at the heart of her struggles. Underneath these incongruent beliefs she felt a deep abiding need to acknowledge the integrity and importance of her Native heritage,

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and to find a way to integrate this rich tradition and spiritual teaching into her everyday life.

### **How to open the circle**

Initially, because Marsha came from a highly intellectual and secular frame of mind with strong resistance to anything that appeared highly ritualistic, we began the process of exploring a sacred circle on paper. This externalised the process in a way that felt more under her control. In other cases, even where Indigenous client may have a deep personal awareness of spiritual spaces, starting with a safe approach like drawing on paper may be helpful and appropriate.

In other situations, I have found that clients are ready and prefer to enact ritual space in a more participatory way. In these situations, I will have the client symbolically 'draw' a circle in the room or place where we are working, and then go into that circle to do the exploring and personal work therein with my supportive presence and assistance throughout the process. These approaches in my work integrate an Indigenous sense of symbol work, play therapy, psycho-educational work, Neuro-linguistic Programming, and Ericksonian suggestion that assists in facilitating greater self-awareness across conscious and unconscious parts of self.

With the present client, we drew a circle into which Marsha placed the different parts of herself she wished to highlight and explore. The process was then to slowly discuss the meanings associated with her sense of self, where the areas for change were felt by her, and how she might find ways of creating healing and greater awareness through the process.

The areas Marsha listed in and around her circle were related to major social and cultural forms of identity. Nine large thematic areas were listed, each containing a wealth of personal and social experiences, associations, and memories that effectively made up Marsha's sense of her somewhat fragmented self. Her sense of unity came from being a spiritual and growing individual whose social conscience was strong. Her sense of fragmentation appeared to be related to her identity blind spots – that is, in as much as she was lacking in awareness of how her identity was 'put together,' she felt parts of herself were missing and disjointed.

Marsha sought an experience of greater self-integration, congruence, and peace. This core intention toward healing and insight formed the basis for our therapy together, so that our work respected and integrated an acknowledgement of Indigenous values. This work was made all the more significant for both client and therapist, because my role as a senior psychotherapist, academic, and researcher enabled us both to openly debate the merits of secular, mainstream religious, and Indigenous perspectives and teachings. We were able to affirm and highlight the vital role that Indigenous heritage plays in forming a solid sense of identity, and within this to understand how colonial history had a large impact on Marsha's family attitudes, beliefs, and values.

The parts of Marsha's circle consisted of:

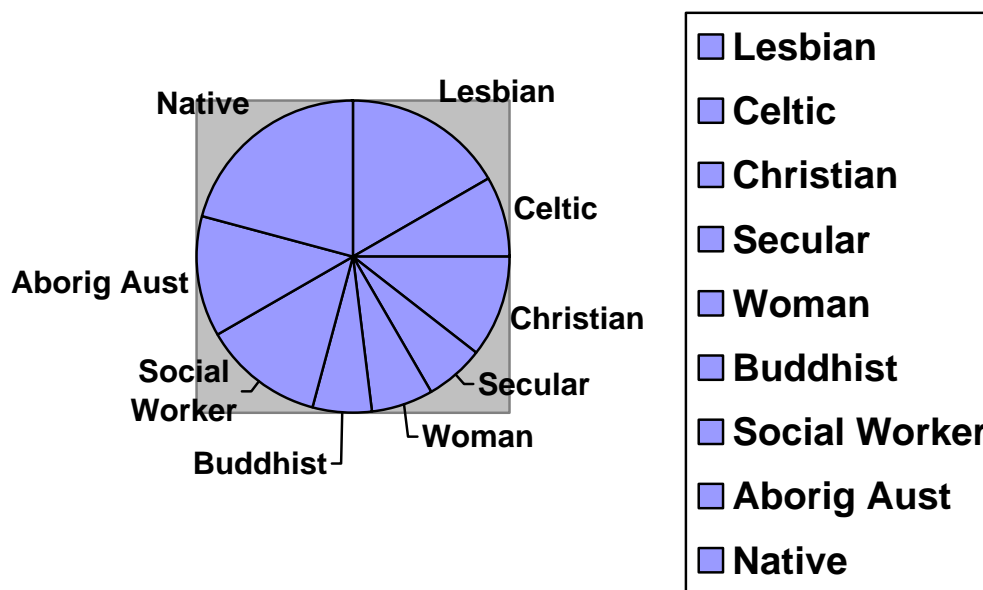
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1. Lesbian Spirituality (Two-Spirited Path)
2. Celtic Spirituality
3. Christian Spirituality
4. Secular Spirituality/Values
5. Being a woman
6. Buddhist/Zen Spirituality
7. Social Worker/Researcher
8. Aboriginal Australian
9. Native Canadian

These areas can be seen in Table One.

Upon initial reflection, having the data on paper created an immediate awareness of naming different areas of life that can often be assumed and/or overlooked. When working with clients, this new awareness can be part of an empowerment process that allows the individual to articulate and acknowledge the 'missing pieces' of their life, by coordinating and discussing the inter-relationships between the pieces of the pie.

**Table One:**



### Exploring aspects of identity

The first insight that emerged upon analysis of these different parts of Marsha's identity was the large area occupied by the identities of Lesbian Spirituality, Celtic, Aboriginal Australian, and First Nations. Over time these areas tended to be marginalised and problematic aspects of identity for Marsha. Her sense of naming the spiritual was to place significance, meaning, and power in these aspects of identity. In some ways, these parts

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of her life were only recently coming to the foreground, yet they made up well over half of her past unconscious sense of identity. The fact that each of these four areas occupied a distinct area in her diagram is worth explanation.

For Marsha, lesbian spirituality occupied a space that articulates and acknowledges the unique perspectives that being gay brings to social life in a predominantly heterosexist society. Lesbian spirituality works to reframe other assumed identities, and to place itself within a unique cultural perspective that honours and nourishes family, gay relationships, and gay lifestyle. Lesbian identity links closely with other marginalised identities, and so Marsha placed this next to contemporary First Nations identity, and Celtic identity. Part of the reason for this close association is that her sense of lesbian-self was linked to the First Nations Two-Spirited tradition, where the gay or lesbian individual had a place of pride and leadership in many traditional communities. As such, being gay relates to being a bridge between male and female, between different perspectives, and a link between different cultural spaces. For Marsha being lesbian defined in large part her sense of being a woman. Later on she discussed aspects of being a woman that were not necessarily related to her being lesbian, and so she framed up a smaller piece of the circle to express this part of her identity.

European Tribal identity linked with Marsha's French and Irish Celtic roots. These areas of personal heritage were important during times of life when Marsha's sense of uncertainty and hardship forced her to re-connect with her roots. Knowing where she came from helped her to know where she was at today. Clients often experience a sense of flouting and un-rooted-ness due to lack of awareness of the significance of racial and cultural origins in their personal story. Re-claiming these origins can often assist people in defining their identities today, and in charting a course of where they want to go for tomorrow.

Aboriginal Australian identity in Marsha's story related to the ways in which the culture and Dreamtime stories, the everyday lifestyles, and the friendships maintained with Aboriginal Australians had impacted deeply on her sense of personhood. She had lived in Australia for only four years, but the impact of her long term relationship with Silvia was felt deeply in her shifting sense of identification with Aboriginal Australian issues. During this time she reported a deepened appreciation and feeling of personal awakening related to her own Indigenous identity.

### **Acknowledging and honouring**

Naming this deepening sense of identity came as a bit of a surprise to Marsha, and showed her how much she loved and valued her interaction and sense of community among Aboriginal Australians. Because of this experience she realised that identity can grow through association, but on the other hand, she was painfully aware of what she had lost through the changes created by colonisation and by the circumstances in her past life.



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In contrast to other approaches seeking to capitalise and manipulate cultural artefacts, culture in Marsha's experience was about participating, interacting, and sharing of life. Through hindsight she realised how precious time spent with people in everyday life really is, and how this time and interaction contributes to forming personal and social identity. Marsha realised that when this time spent with others is engaged with love, devotion, and commitment, the results can often create enriching and supportive identities of trust.

### **Grief, loss and power of identity**

In contrast, she also realised that if she had not faced unemployment and personal hardship in the past, she may not have made the choice to leave Canada and to risk making a new life in Australia. These realisations gave her a sense of grief and loss related to what she had given up, including opportunities to reconnect with her heritage. This feeling of mourning was mixed with a bitter-sweet sense of finally awakening to the value and importance of her personal and social identity, and of her need to re-invest in this area of her life, in at least consciously acknowledging and working towards personal integration in whatever ways were possible in her new life.

Marsha's First Nations identity linked with her pervasive sense of 'Native self', connection with her ancestors, the stories that meant a lot to her, and in relationship with daily ritual, space, time, and healing. Her sense of being Indigenous to Canada was very strong, and came to the fore when she travelled back to her Native Land. This experience was profound, earth-shattering, mind-blowing and deep for Marsha. Because her past had often been about unexplainable isolation, lack of self-identity, and a vacuum of self, for Marsha this suffering was most often filled with a living and spiritual relationship with the land of her birth.

Through looking at these aspects of Marsha's identity it became clearer for her that aspects of her Indigenous identity formed the majority of her personal and social values, beliefs, and approaches to spirituality, ritual, culture, and faith. However, these parts of Marsha's self had experienced the greatest degrees of shame, guilt, self-loathing, control, suppression, and denial until recent years when the healing process began to unfold in her life.

### **Acknowledging limits of exercise (vs. depth of personal experience)**

After realising these insights, we discussed how space contained by the pie diagram felt artificial, and was another way of just breaking down parts of one's life into segments. This became important to acknowledge, because for Marsha aspects of her identity overlapped and interacted in quite dynamic ways. During different points in her story she had 'dove into' one aspect of self such that it became her whole sense of self. But in recent years she had a feeling of something new emerging, some part of herself that could contain and acknowledge all the parts of her self without denial or fragmentation.

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Marsha's experience reminded me in certain ways, through in a milder form, of clients experiencing classic forms of post-traumatic recovery.

In certain ways Marsha's sense of self had sometimes changed quickly, and sometimes slowly. We acknowledged that one can not be tied into the pie diagram, as it is only a quick snap-shot of life today. It was at this point that we looked at the pie diagram as a metaphor for the Sacred Circle ritual in Indigenous teachings. When the perspective was shifted into a metaphorical and spiritual association of meanings, the 'circle of self' took on less of an empirical listing of parts of self. The lines between parts ceased to exist, and the associations became creative and numinous. Marsha immediately felt a sense of how she could bring the insights we shared into her personal exploration of ritual space, where she could actively accept and work with her identity issues in the safe space of the Sacred Circle. It was important for Marsha to acknowledge these spiritual laws, and to find new awareness or ideas, and new experiences that could shift and change her beliefs and identities into something a bit more flexible and resourceful.

This being said, it was interesting to note that the Christian part of Marsha's identity formed one piece of the pie that appeared fairly small in comparison to all the other areas. This appeared significant because of the context of her past, where the Christian occupied huge chunks of her time in study, work, and personal intentions of becoming a minister. But after coming out and seeing clearly how women were suppressed, and how the Christian churches had contributed to colonisation and the destruction of Indigenous culture, Marsha realised she needed to find a different path than Christian ministry. The sense of being 'Christian' had therefore become softened, and perhaps been more integrated into her overall sense of self than previously realised.

### **Other parts of identity**

Next to Christianity sat Secular Spirituality, which is a fascinating part of this identity mosaic. Marsha could acknowledge that our secular life and all the values it entails comprise a form of spirituality or meaning making. The things we value may include enjoying the media, access to information, music, dance, theatre, civic and other social gatherings, shopping, etc... These aspects of life are integral to social and personal rituals that exist in the present day. It seemed natural for Marsha to give space for this as an important though less-occupying part of her overall life.

The next area to be given space was a sense of womanhood. In this area Marsha acknowledged that her identity as a woman linked with her two-spirited identity, and together these two spoke of mothering qualities, nurturing, caring, and giving life. She acknowledged that in future she hoped to have a child with Silvia, but that being a woman was not tied to being a mother. However, at a deeper level for her, being a woman spoke of being human – and this was linked to a spiritual calling. She lamented that women could not become priests in some mainstream churches. Her background was Roman Catholic, and as such she felt many issues still needed to be resolved.

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Part of this for Marsha was a not-so-distant sense of having taken ancient vocational vows that rendered her life in service to others. She shared that never before had she spoken of these matters to anyone. These vows were in the core of her being, and they included but also transcended the dogmatic aspects of Christianity, Buddhism, and Indigenous religious teachings. Indeed, these 'vows' for Marsha were described as such an intimate part of her being that they could not be separated from her DNA. She said these vows could be expressed only partially in words, but that they formed the basis of her relationship with the Land, the People, and with Spirit. The vows included a sense of justice, integrity, healing, and service.

### **Metaphors of power**

We discussed how these vows seemed to parallel those taken by the Bodhisattva in Eastern traditions. Through this discussion we entered a spiritual realm of associations that suggested experiences or realisations of a very ancient self, past lives, and consciousness of evolutionary processes that transcend everyday material concerns. Marsha's physiological state appeared to shift, deepen, soften, and become illuminated all at the same time. She was able to then look at her struggles, and the history of her life, from a very different and much more resourceful state of being. In this 'birds eye view' she felt more of a connection with Eagle Spirit, and was able to see how her life journey was a test for her soul to grow in awareness, and in deep abiding compassion. These insights shifted her process, and allowed us to look with greater understanding of the deeper challenges and opportunities she faced now and in the future.

Also acknowledged in this discussion was the great impact and value of Eastern teachings in Marsha's life and being. Although she had internalised these teachings in many ways, she had always felt that the Eastern was somehow still foreign to herself and not to be claimed as part of her conscious identity. But through the process of our discussion, the Buddhist/Zen Spirituality aspects of her identity were acknowledged more by bringing them clearly into the Circle of Self. In doing so Marsha gave space overtly to this sense of identity for the first time in her life.

Overall, Marsha commented that there was a sense in many of these areas of her life of much more work needing to be done in the future; to grow in acknowledgement and awareness of becoming a compassionate being of light and healing. She commented how profound and great it was for her to just feel accepted, and that the space created in therapy unlocked many doors she never realised existed for her, but which were so totally native to her sense of self.

The last area mention by Marsha was being a Social Worker/Researcher and the emphasis on the emotional, psychological, intellectual, and social aspects involved in her discipline. This area included academic and professional training, and linked Marsha to her identity as a helper, and healer. She acknowledged that this area too had consumed her life for the best part of a decade, during the time when she was learning most and trying to establish herself in the field. Her transition to Australia was also a big part of her story, in terms of the pressures involved in immigrating to a new country. She felt that these transitions were settling down very quickly, mostly because she lived in a settled

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home with Silvia, her job was secure, and she had become an Australian citizen only two years after her move.

### **The power of acknowledgment**

Once we had discussed the areas in Marsha's 'Identity Circle', it became clearer how the emerging identity structures had come to challenge the dominant social discourses of colonisation, and of Christianity in particular, by articulating the importance of different spaces in which to acknowledge different parts of self. Marsha felt that Christianity tends to dominate people's lives, so that one can not be for instance both Christian and Buddhist. She felt that her Roman Catholic upbringing had not only suppressed her sense of being a lesbian, but it had also mitigated and placed shame over her Native heritage.

However, after facing the trauma of these experiences and giving space for healing, Marsha had an incredible sense of wisdom in seeing that when one goes deeper than surface identifications, the different parts of her identity needed to be acknowledged because these parts of her life gave her a sense of empowerment, wellbeing and health. 'How can I deny who I am? Why would I want to anymore?' She commented. She further acknowledged that both Christian and Buddhist traditions seek to build compassionate human beings. The same was true in her knowledge of Native teachings, and in many ways, even more so because those teachings connected her intimately with Mother Earth, the passing seasons, her spiritual totems, and rituals that gave her life meaning, insight, and resilience.

Through a process of values clarification in our dialogue, Marsha came to acknowledge that the basis of her overall sense of identity was better placed in her Indigenous being rather than in some colonial-driven agenda such as Christianity. Even while she felt that it was OK to keep certain aspects of her Christian self, particularly her intimate personal connection with Jesus of Nazareth, these aspects needed to become more clearly based in her emerging sense of 'core identity'. This was something new for her.

From a much more flexible place of formulating identity, and integrating belief structures into something coherent and congruent for Marsha, we were able to acknowledge that the core intentions of all good religious and cultural perspectives are complimentary and are not opposed. This basic realisation allowed Marsha to feel free. It was then a matter of being 'at play in the field of the Lord' by actively re-creating her own personal beliefs, based on her own unique sense of theology. She acknowledged that her next phase of personal work would be related to constructing her beliefs into a framework that was helpful, supportive, and healing for her during this next decade of her life. After ten sessions together, it appeared we had done a fair bit of work. Marsha reported feeling deeply satisfied with the interactions and said she may get in touch with me in the future when she felt there was more work we might be able to do together.

### **Highlighting themes**

One major theme relates to power. Power involves an ability to exercise personal freedom to acknowledge reality, and to have that reality acknowledged in turn. Therapy is a theatre of powerful interactions, in as much as the therapist is able to co-acknowledge

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the reality of the client. This is not a simple process. Realities can easily be muddled, through prior trauma or misguided interpretations of personal and social experience. Many of us construct unresourceful beliefs that prevent us from healing or accessing changes we need and want in life. Therapists need to be expert witnesses to technologies of personal transformation. This need is all the more significant in the realm of disempowerment, oppression, and when working with inter-generational trauma in Indigenous contexts.

On one hand the discourses related to the colonisation of Australia and Canada by European invading nations seek to continue denial of the right of place that First Nations peoples occupy. On the other hand, definite power relationships are involved in the simple process of either denying or acknowledging spaces, values, beliefs, and cultural meanings. By naming our identity, we place ourselves within a historical and political environment. This is true regardless of the place from which we stand.

For example, to highlight a Western medical model verses an Indigenous healing method is only one example of this battle for authority. If we identify with one verses the other, our discourse and our politics will unfold accordingly. These battles for authority define whether or not we allowing people space to be. To disallow a people, and take away their language, political self-determination, reproductive rights, custodianship of the land, is to not acknowledge their spiritual and material birth right.

With these realisations it became clearer how both Marsha may have lost parts of her identity over time through the inter-generational violence and trauma created by shame, denial, suppression, racism, and systemic oppression enacted throughout colonial history. These factors influenced her grandparents and her parent's attitudes. These underlying, subterranean values are still very much unfolding in the present day. In some cases, underlying racial prejudices are more active in today's world but are less visible, and more insidious, due to political correctness and fear being seen as racist.

It is interesting to consider that if we wish to have future generations in ever greater identity confusion, we ought to continue on the path we are now going down. But if we would like to enrich our sense of identity, prevent untold suffering, depression, and other forms of mental illness created by these social tactics of shame, we need to protect the values of acknowledgement and articulation of our sense of identity for ourselves and for future generations.

### **A national 'post-colonial' political vision**

I would like to articulate a vision for reconciliation, healing, and empowerment of Indigenous cultures. This is perhaps part of my own vision quest coming out of my work with clients like Marsha, and from life experiences of my own. The importance of this vision applies not only to Indigenous cultures but bears direct application to paths of nurturance and practical justice among multicultural and mainstream spaces.

Bowers, R. (2007). Clinical suggestions for honouring Indigenous identity for helpers, counsellors, and healers: The case of 'Marsha', *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), Indigenous Special Issue, 89-104.

If we were to give the right of place to Indigenous peoples, we would have them sit as equals around the tables of political power in Australia, America, and Canada. If our nations were to draw a National Identity Circle, a large piece of this pie would be 'Indigenous'. The importance and relevance to this large piece of our national Australian, Canadian, and American identities is not limited by the percentage of Indigenous peoples in the overall population. We are not talking about percentage politics here. In this process of reconciliation we are articulating and acknowledging a significant part of our national identity and our heritage as being Indigenous.

My vision of healing would be similar to that of many people, and would include aspects of economic and political infrastructure that would allow self-government and self-determination within each community. But these economic and political outcomes would not be surface changes, but deep social and values-based changes highlighted in the national psyche – truly giving value of place and importance of place to Indigenous concerns, not only for the sake of the First Nations people themselves, but because overall the people of the nation understand, value, and support the interests of the Original Custodians of these great lands.

In other words, just as Marsha had internalised a pervasive and lasting sense of 'Aboriginal Australian' identity as a Canadian immigrant to Australia, so different and important aspects of 'Indigenous' identity can become part of people's everyday experience – thus shifting the politics of splintering and fracturing of communities by expanding the base of people nationally who identify with Indigenous sensibilities and culture. Rather than exploiting cultural artefacts, this process can indeed be one of acknowledging differences and supporting one another towards realising our mutual interdependence as one global village.

Instead of creating yet another colonial space, this vision would shift the discourse and allow creative exploration of alternative spaces. For example, rather than continuing the often culturally damaging work of 'Christian' missions, let us consider an 'Indigenous Bush Church' that empowers people to acknowledge their own systems of naming and ritualising life and meaning. This approach could highlight modern and flexible approaches to therapeutic work, education, and honouring of cultural beliefs and knowledge. Where cultural forms have been lost and/or forgotten, let us explore ways of articulating and acknowledging our own forms of Indigenous meaning today. This work is vital to youth and future generations who need to have access to cultural signifiers and ways of thinking, feeling, and sensing the truth of Indigenous wisdom.

In my experience, these forms of ritual have included teaching people how to open sacred circles, how to do personal healing work within sacred and safe spaces, and how to understand and discern spiritual energies, values, and the presence of energies or spirits in people's lives. These skills include exercising discernment, wisdom, and insight in different contexts. These abilities include acknowledgement of our ancestors, and honouring the Spirit of the Land we visit and in which we live. These insights and

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practices create valued spaces of healing, growth, and personal empowerment, both for Indigenous individuals and for secular mainstream people.

There is a wealth of practice and insight that Indigenous peoples have that mainstream society has long overlooked and neglected to recognise as important. At this particular juncture in social evolution, as modern secular peoples become ever more aware of living within a concrete wasteland of depleted natural resources, overgrown garbage heaps, and of our many horrible abuses of Mother Earth, at this time let us consider that the solid teachings of Indigenous Nations must be acknowledged and given their rightful place of importance at the tables of political and social power. This change of values needs to happen to right past wrongs, but more so, because the global community desperately needs to break through its own blind spots with the help of Indigenous forms of holistic, spiritual and intuitive intelligence that speak justice to issues that have been ignored for too long.

Identity formation is a complex endeavour in a 'post-colonial' era, when many people do not even know what their heritage entails. For those of us who do know, it is not necessarily any easier. Being Canadian, American, or Australian may mean a wide range of cultural and racial origins that have been largely forgotten, and/or discounted and rendered irrelevant in the economy and culture of contemporary life. In terms of modern culture then, identity develops in many unconscious ways that do not often acknowledge nor integrate racial and cultural origins, meanings, or associations into everyday life.

Effectively, given the vacuum of identifications created by generational change and trans-generational trauma, many people today are searching for meaning in a postmodern era. The place of therapy within this search can not be underestimated. Further exploration of the use of and respect for Indigenous methods in psychotherapy needs to occur, not only for the sake of acknowledging the valuable insights in world Indigenous approaches to change and healing, but for the sake of continuing to give psychotherapy heart, soul, and greater integrity when applied to different cultural contexts.

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