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"You Never Forget Stuff That Cuts Deep": An Analysis of Storytelling in *Medicine Walk* and *Indian Horse*

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As Richard Wagamese once said, "[t]eachings come from everywhere when you open yourself to them. That's the trick of it really, to open yourself to everything, and everything opens itself to you" (Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations* 118). I believe that this quote holds significant meaning in regard to healing from, and learning from, past traumas and tragedies. When dealing with emotional pain and torment, it may seem easier for one to try and push their feelings away rather than face them. Reliving trauma or difficult experiences by telling them to an audience that is willing to listen can be very therapeutic. Not only does this hold relevance for individual people trying to heal from the past, but also for larger cultural groups healing from acts of cultural genocide committed against their ancestors.

In his novel, *Medicine Walk*, Richard Wagamese delves into the idea that through closure, telling of truths, and sharing stories, broken family relations can be repaired. Moreover, The King's University professor Dr. Tina Trigg argues that although Eldon is undeserving of Frank's compliance with his request in *Medicine Walk*, he proves to be heroic through the disclosure of stories, in her article, "Family Matters" (2). She also highlights that through painful moments and failures within bonds, the importance of familial love is revealed (Trigg 2). In his novel, *Indian Horse*, Wagamese suggests that coming to terms with trauma, especially racism and sexual abuse, is a long and difficult process. Furthermore, Radboud University professor Dr. Doro Wiese reveals the tremendous impact of "oral storytelling techniques" in Wagamese's novel, as they not only make sensitive Indigenous topics accessible and bearable for all readers but also allow readers to emotionally connect to the historically relevant stories ("Nighttime Invasions" 58). Dr. Julie Cairnie, a professor at the University of Guelph, points out that Saul's relationship with hockey in *Indian Horse* reflects that of many other residential school survivors; there is an obvious struggle between embracing their love for a sport that provides them with fulfillment, and not wanting to betray and invalidate the abuse they suffered in the same place where they found that love ("Truth and Reconciliation" 113). In this essay, I will argue against the common belief that suggests forgetting about something is the best way to move on. To heal from trauma and hardships, we

have to engage in painful remembering; through storytelling and reliving the past. This idea is emphasized through the experiences of the characters Frank Starlight, Eldon Starlight, and Saul Indian Horse, as well as in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Instead of coming to terms with his pain, Eldon Starlight in *Medicine Walk* mutes his pain with alcohol, which does more harm than good. In the opening chapters of the novel, it is easy to view Eldon as a terrible person, rather than having sympathy for him, due to his lack of involvement with his son Frank. However, over the course of the novel, the hardships of Eldon's life are revealed, and it becomes easier to understand his troubled actions. On top of not connecting to his Ojibway culture growing up, Eldon also suffered the loss of his father, witnessed the abuse of his mother at the hands of her boyfriend, and lost his best friend, Jimmy, during the Korean War. The way that Jimmy succumbed to his injuries was particularly hard for Eldon, and provides some insight as to why he turned to alcohol to numb his pain:

> [Eldon] took the knife and held it under [Jimmy's] ribcage and Jimmy stopped, his body going perfectly still as he stared at him over the rim of his hand. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, there was peace there and he nodded at him. The knife went in almost on its own and he twisted it like he was trained to do and leaned forward cheek to cheek with Jimmy and heard his last breath ease out of him. (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 165)

Although Eldon was doing Jimmy an act of kindness by putting him out of his misery after being shot by the enemy, he still took on the guilt of his death. As Wagamese writes, this traumatic event sent Eldon "screaming and weeping into the breech [*sic*] of his own private war" (*Medicine Walk* 166). It is evident that Wagamese wishes to instill a sense of empathy and understanding in the reader in response to Eldon's painful past and reliance on alcohol. It is also evident that although he recognizes alcoholism as a predictable result of emotional pain, he does not recommend it as an effective way to heal from said pain. Through Eldon's unstable and untrustworthy behaviour, as well as his high spending to fuel his drinking habits, Wagamese delivers the message that alcohol delays one's path to healing.

Not only are the negative effects of alcohol shown in regard to how Eldon handled the loss of Jimmy, but also by how the death of his lover, Angie, and the birth of his son, Frank, played out. Before Angie became pregnant with Frank, it seemed like Eldon's life was changing for the better. He finally became sober and secured a stable job. However, once the responsibility and fear

of being a parent finally hit him, Eldon resorted back to his old ways: "It just seemed to happen and it wasn't long before he was in the lure of it; … the low burn of booze hitting his belly, the cottony feeling at the sides of his head that chased all thoughts away" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 221). Despite Angie's disapproval of his alcohol use, Eldon's emotional turmoil from his traumatic past did not allow him to let go of it. When Angie went into labour, Eldon was out getting drunk instead of being there to help her (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 222). She died giving birth, and as the doctor explained to Eldon, "'[s]he had a chance if she had made it [to the hospital] in time'" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 222). Eldon could not handle Angie's death, so he gave Frank to his friend and boss, Bunky, who was also Angie's husband, to be raised. All the while, indulging in alcohol to cope with his pain. (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk*). Even his attempts to stay in contact with Frank were hindered by his lack of sobriety. What started as a coping mechanism for the loss of Jimmy, turned into a negative force that affected his work life and relationship with Angie. It also turned into one of the main factors that caused Angie's death, and his lack of relationship with his son. This demonstrates that alcohol dependency can create a chain reaction of negative events that cause more emotional damage during one's healing journey, that were supposed to be what the alcohol was numbing in the first place. Wagamese juxtaposes this with the theme of storytelling as a therapeutic practice in the novel.

The main plot of *Medicine Walk* serves to reveal the power of storytelling to provide closure, encourage forgiveness, and heal broken relationships. After Eldon reaches out to Frank, who is now a young adult, the two of them embark on a journey through the mountains of British Columbia to the spot where Eldon wishes to be buried. Eldon knew he was dying, as his liver was failing from all the alcohol use. Despite not making much of an effort to connect with Frank previously, Eldon wanted to make amends with Frank before passing away. Along their journey, Eldon tells Frank stories about his life. As Trigg explains in her journal, "[t]hings need to be spoken, not to be perfect; for Eldon Starlight, this means entrusting the story of his life to his son" ("Family Matters" 2). Although some of these stories are painful to tell and relive, there is a need from both Eldon and Frank, for these stories to not be left unsaid. After Eldon passes and Frank buries him, it is clear that Frank has come to a place of acceptance and forgiveness: "'War's over, Eldon,' he said finally. 'I hope when you get to where you're goin' that she's standing there waiting'" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 239). As Frank said this standing over his father's grave, a sense of catharsis and healing unfolded. Until listening to Eldon's stories about his life, their

Indigenous culture, and his mother, Frank held quite a bit of resentment towards his father. This is where the symbolism of the title of the novel comes into play. The father and son's journey together through the mountains was quite literally a 'medicine walk'. The stories served as the medicine Frank needed to come to terms with the rocky relationship he had with his father, and the lack of connection he had to his culture. Providing Frank with stories was all that Eldon could give and also served as the medicine he needed to finally be at peace with the wrongs he committed in life. This demonstrates that storytelling is the key to healing, rather than escaping trauma through substance abuse and forgetting.

Similar to Eldon's use of alcohol in *Medicine Walk*, Saul succumbs to its numbing effects in *Indian Horse*, as well. On top of being taken away from his culture and family at a young age, Saul suffers from racism and abuse during his time at St. Jerome's Christian School, which was a residential school. The racism continued on to his hockey career as an adult, as well. The harmful stereotypes and taunts that were forced onto him by the public were particularly hard for Saul to bear:

> When I scored, the ice was littered with plastic Indian dolls… I was taunted endlessly. They called me Indian Whores, Horse Piss, Stolen Pony. Elbows and knees were constantly flying at me. I couldn't play a shift that didn't include some kind of cheap shot, threat or curse. (Wagamese, *Indian Horse* 164)

What once was his happy place was ruined by the racism he received as an Indigenous hockey player. He was able to withstand the hateful treatment for a while, but eventually, it became too much for him. Saul started to act out, and his hockey career came to an end. To deal with his painful emotions, he resorted to drinking:

> In alcohol I found an antidote to exile… My new escape sustained me for a while. Whenever the stories and the invented histories started to unravel, I'd move on to a new crowd in a new tavern, a new place where the Indian in me was forgotten in the face of the ribald, hilarious fictions I spun. Finally, though, the drink had me snared. I spoke less and drank more, and I became the Indian again; drunken and drooling and reeling, a caricature everyone sought to avoid. (Wagamese, *Indian Horse* 180-181)

With this, Wagamese implies that drinking is unhelpful when it comes to healing from trauma and pain, such as that which comes from racism. Wiese suggests that "Saul's loss of self-respect [from drinking] demonstrates that racism leads to a direct denial of personhood since the subject of

racism has to stand in for the idea circulating in society about a whole group of persons" ("Nighttime Invasions" 61). Due to his heavy drinking, Saul actually became the stereotypical 'Indian' that was being forced onto him in the first place. Similar to what he does in *Medicine Walk*, Wagamese contrasts the effects of drinking with the effects of storytelling on Saul's healing process in *Indian Horse*.

From the very first chapter of *Indian Horse*, it is very clear that storytelling is a central theme. Saul is at The New Dawn Centre, a treatment facility he was sent to after almost dying from alcohol poisoning. The counsellors preach that "[i]f we want to live at peace with ourselves, we need to tell our stories", which although Saul does not believe at first, is a message that is true to Wagamese's intention with *Indian Horse* (3). Saul does not feel comfortable verbally sharing his story in the sharing circle, so he decides to write it down, which sheds light on the readers' role in relation to Saul's healing. The audience of *Indian Horse* serves as the receptive listener to Saul's traumatic past, and through telling his story to the reader, he is able to work towards a place of peace. Wagamese strategically waits until the end of the novel to reveal the sexual abuse that Father Leboutilier subjected Saul to:

> 'You are a glory, Saul.' That's what he always told me. It's what he whispered to me in the dim light of his quarters, what he said to me those nights he snuck into the dormitory and put his head beneath the covers. The words he used in the back of the barn when he slipped my trousers down. That was the phrase that began the groping, the tugging, the pulling and the sucking, and those were always the last words he said to me as he left, arranging his priestly clothes. (*Indian Horse* 199)

This passage comes as a shock to the reader, as Father Leboutilier was painted as this positive character in Saul's life up until this point. This connects to Cairnie's observation that "for some residential schools survivors, sport was the only positive experience in the schools, but they are reluctant to share this for fear that it diminishes the brutality of the school experience" ("Truth and Reconciliation" 113). Similar to how hockey had positive and negative impacts on Saul's life, so did Father Leboutilier. An essential part of Saul's healing process was reliving and remembering what happened to him, despite it being painful, as his escape to alcohol was not working. After sharing this painful memory with the reader, he also confided in his billet family, Fred, Martha, and Virgil: "While we ate, I told them about Father Leboutilier. I told them about how the game was the means of my emotional and mental survival" (Wagamese, *Indian Horse* 212). Through

telling his story, Saul was able to come to understand his traumatic past and regain a positive connection with hockey through coaching.

In his novels, *Medicine Walk* and *Indian Horse*, author Richard Wagamese depicts the idea that while many people resort to alcoholism to drown out the emotional baggage of trauma or hardships, the best way to heal is through storytelling and remembering. Wagamese also encourages the reader to understand why alcohol is often used to numb the pain that comes with trauma. As studies on residential school survivors have shown, Saul and Eldon are not unique in how they handle their trauma:

> Results showed that 43.5% of participants [in the study] had an alcohol problem... Of the respondents, 34.1% reported being physically abused before the age of 18, while 35.2% reported having been victims of sexual abuse. Moreover, 28.5% of participants had attended residential schools and 71.1% of them believed that attending these institutions had a negative impact on their lives. (Ross et al., "Addictive Behaviors" 187)

While statistics allow us to better understand and empathize with victims of colonization, we can also recognize the power of storytelling to heal. This message extends beyond the characters in the two novels, as there are also implications for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. Although *Indian Horse* is a fictional story, the ideas it refers to are very much real and grounded in Canadian history. The novel follows Saul telling his story to heal from his past, but perhaps the novel could serve as a story itself to help Canada heal from its legacy of colonization. With the embedded themes of storytelling, trauma, and flawed histories, Wagamese makes a statement about how Canada needs to continue working towards Truth and Reconciliation, and there is a long way to go before we get there. To truly reconcile, all Canadians need to empathetically listen to narratives such as *Indian Horse*, as understanding the truth will encourage change. Instead of dissociating from painful histories, it is important to recognize that these events cut deep. Forgetting is not possible when deep cuts leave visible scars. Opening oneself up to tell stories, listen to stories, and remember creates the foundation for a better future.

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