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Chapter 9: Prayer with Pain: Ceremonial Suffering among the Mi'kmaq

Suzanne Owen

We are not individuals in one sense, for, in a community of people, we are all linked together, we are all part of the same family. So, when my neighbour hurts, I hurt. I have to play a role in making sure that he stays healthy as long as he can.

- Saqamaw Mi'sel Joe¹

The introductory quotation by Saqamaw (chief) Mi'sel Joe of the Conne River Mi'kmaq suggests that the suffering of the individual is inseparable from the suffering of the community, and that there is a shared responsibility for the health of all individuals. There are many ways to pray amongst First Nations, but often those that involve an element of physical suffering are considered the most 'powerful', and are sometimes viewed as sacrifices that can be regarded as offerings or gifts to Spirit.² By prayer, I refer to solitary or communal ceremonial practices for communication with other-than-human beings, to use the phrase coined by Irving Hallowell, that enhance the power of the petitioner(s).³ It could be argued that when something is asked for – visions, healing – then something must be given in exchange in order to restore the balance and promote respectful relationships.

Many First Nations, whose members participate in traditional ceremonies that involve physical suffering, include individuals who have experienced abuse in residential schools. For them, traditional ceremonies can offer powerful forms healing within a social setting; one form employed for such purposes is the sweat lodge.⁴ Waldram, Herring and Young have noted how 'there has been an extensive revitalization of the sweat lodge as a general treatment approach for a wide variety of physical and mental health problems (as well as for social and spiritual purposes), an approach which also has the effect of reintegrating individuals into their cultures.'⁵ They suggest that this reintegration into the community can make ceremonies like the sweat lodge effective tools for overcoming the trauma and

¹ Raoul R. Andersen, John K. Crellin and Mi'sel Joe, "Revitalization of a Mi'kmaq Community." In *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, edited by Graham Harvey (London; New York: Cassell, 2000), 250.

² 'Spirit' (niskam, in the Mi'kmaw language) is widely used by Mi'kmaq when speaking English to refer to the source or Creator.

³ A. Irving Hallowell, 'Ojibwa ontology, behaviour, and world view', in G. Harvey, ed. *Readings in Indigenous Religions* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002 [1960]), 17-49.

⁴ For research on the efficacy of the sweat lodge for aboriginal wellbeing, see Jeannette Wagemakers Schiff and Kerrie Moore, "The impact of the sweat lodge ceremony on dimensions of well-being." *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center* 13, 3 (2006): 48–69.

⁵ James B. Waldram, D. Ann Herring and T. Kue Young, *Aboriginal Health in Canada: Historical, Cultural, and Epidemiological Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 207.

alienation brought on by the many and varied effects of colonization. The residential school is an institution widely recognized as a source of such trauma and alienation. One Eskasoni Mi'kmaq remarked to me that many of those who grew up in residential schools are the ones turning to 'traditional spirituality'. This raises the questions about the link between the residential school experience and ceremonies that entail suffering of the physical body, such as the sweat lodge, fasting and, more controversially, the Sun Dance. These ceremonies, and their role in the revitalization of 'traditional spirituality' among the Mi'kmaq, will be explored in this chapter

As part of my research into participation in ceremonies among First Nations, I attended the Conne River Mi'kmaq powwow in 2003 and 2005, in order to understand the importance of 'protocols' -- agreed rules-- for participation in ceremonies.⁶ Protocols regulate a range of practises from offering tobacco to an elder, to smoking a pipe in ceremony (e.g. a woman must refrain from doing so if 'on her moon'). Although it was not the focus of my research, reactions to a particularly hot sweat lodge ceremony I attended during the 2005 powwow led me to reflect on the place of 'suffering' in the revitalization of Mi'kmaq spirituality.⁷ During the ceremony, several Mi'kmaq participants from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick spoke at length about their personal suffering – domestic abuse, drug and alcohol dependency, residential school experiences and estrangement. Two non-Mi'kmaq women left halfway through because, one told me later, it was too hot and one participant's narrative about his time in Shubenacadie Indian Residential School was 'too long and harrowing'. The Eskasoni Mi'kmaq sweat lodge keeper ran the ceremony as he would on the reserve, explaining little and using it as a form of healing for himself and the other Mi'kmaq participants.

The next day, when thanking the sweat lodge keeper, I remarked that the ceremony was quite hot. He said it was not he who made the sweat hot, but the ancestors. However, a Newfoundland Mi'kmaq who did not participate in the ceremony said that 'some people feel they need to suffer in the sweats.'⁸ This and similar comments have led me to investigate further the role of the sweat lodge and other ceremonies in transforming the effects of trauma

⁶ This was later published as chapter 5, 'Intertribal Borrowing of Ceremonies among the Mi'kmaq of Newfoundland' in Suzanne Owen, *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008).

⁷ This sweat lodge ceremony is mentioned briefly in Owen, *Appropriation*, 127.

⁸ Unlike Mi'kmaq in the rest of Atlantic Canada, Newfoundland Mi'kmaq were not taken into Indian residential schools because, prior to 1949, Newfoundland was not part of Canada. Then after confederation it was several decades before Newfoundland Mi'kmaq were able to obtain 'Indian Status' (see Owen, *Appropriation*, 116-119).

– an aspect of the contemporary practice of traditional ceremonies that has largely gone unremarked upon by those from outside the communities involved, such as myself, yet are central for understanding the differences between indigenous performances of ceremonies such as the sweat lodge and those performed by non-indigenous people. In answering the question of why some Mi'kmaq 'feel they need to suffer in the sweats', the impact of colonialism, particularly the residential school experience, becomes important for understanding the complex nature of physical suffering endured in a ceremonial context.

Although I am focussing on the Mi'kmaq of eastern Canada, the issue of suffering is common to many indigenous peoples that have been disrupted through colonialism and its institutions; therefore ways of addressing the issues have also been shared. This has had an impact on the types of ceremonies performed and ways they have been adapted to meet the needs of those who are experiencing suffering. Effective ceremonies such as the sweat lodge are now widespread among indigenous peoples in North America. The form practised today by Mi'kmaq originated from among the Plains Indians, with some adaptations and variations.⁹ While there are different attitudes among Mi'kmaq regarding suffering in the sweat lodge, a certain level of physical discomfort is to be expected. Reflecting on his role as a sweat lodge keeper, Lewis Mehl-Madrona (Cherokee-Lakota) advised: 'We understand that our role is to bring the people to a point of suffering that is helpful for clearing the mind, but never taking them beyond what they can handle. My teacher said, "If you chase the people out of the lodge, what good is that? No prayers take place."' ¹⁰ Yet others have suggested that 'one must participate a few times before the mind is able to concentrate on prayer and ignore the intense heat and discomfort.'¹¹

For this chapter, alongside the views of Mi'kmaq participants I met at the Conne River Mi'kmaq Powwow, I will discuss two autobiographical pieces, one by renowned Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe (1932-2007), who attended a residential school, and the other by a counsellor, Randolph Bowers, who did not. As it is not just those individuals who have experienced residential schooling that are participating in traditional ceremonies, the wider impact of colonialism needs to be taken into consideration; for example, the creation of a distinction between 'Indian' and 'non-Indian' left those with mixed heritage, such as Randolph Bowers, with an ambiguous or confused status. These personal accounts show how

⁹ See Owen, *Appropriation*, 113, 121-2, 127.

¹⁰ Lewis Mehl-Madrona, "Sweat Lodge," *The Journal Of Alternative And Complementary Medicine* 16, 6 (2010): 609.

¹¹ Waldram, Herring and Young, *Aboriginal Health in Canada*, 111.

contemporary forms of traditional spirituality can be viewed as responses to both personal and collective trauma brought on by the affects of colonization.

There is little attention given to this topic, particularly with regard to the Mi'kmaq. American anthropologist Harald Prins is an exception for including a discussion of contemporary Mi'kmaq practices in relation to colonialism and contextualizes the adoption of and reactions to Plains Indian-derived ceremonies.¹² In general, scholarship on suffering in a religious context tends to focus on rituals involving 'pain', such as traditional initiation ceremonies in different indigenous cultures or mortification of the flesh in Christian or Muslim contexts.¹³ In a wide-ranging study, Ariel Glucklich explores 'sacred pain' in various religious practices, including the Plains Indian Sun Dance, from a psychological-neurological perspective.¹⁴ Glucklich offers a theoretical route toward understanding the place of suffering in contemporary Mi'kmaq spirituality.

In exploring 'sacred pain', Glucklich recognizes that suffering 'is not a sensation but an emotional and evaluative reaction to any number of causes,' some entirely absent of physical pain, such as grief, and 'that pain can be the solution to suffering, a psychological analgesic that removes anxiety, guilt, and even depression.'¹⁵ In other words, practitioners might hurt themselves physically in order to relieve psychological suffering. He elucidates the difference between 'the unwanted pain of a cancer patient or victim of a car crash, and the voluntary and modulated self-hurting of a religious practitioner,' which produces 'cognitive-emotional changes, that affect the identity of the individual subject and her sense of belonging to a larger community or to a more fundamental state of being.' Furthermore, sacred pain transforms 'destructive or disintegrative suffering into a positive religious-psychological mechanism for reintegration within a more deeply valued level of reality than

¹² Harald E.L. Prins, *The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996).

¹³ A number of studies explore the use of pain in religion, particularly in martyrdom and asceticism, influenced by the language analysis of Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) – see Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42-44, 221 fn 7 – and more recently a paper by Chris Shilling and Philip Mellor, "Saved from pain or saved through pain? Modernity, instrumentalization and the religious use of pain as body technique," *European Journal of Social Theory* 13, 4 (2010): 521-537, but few address it within a Native American or First Nations context, except in the context of 'initiation' rituals or 'rites of passage'. In his chapter on 'Emotions of Passage', Ariel Glucklich draws on Mircea Mircea, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), and Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), among others, and classes the Plains Indian Sun Dance as 'initiation' (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 143), although many adults perform it annually for a number of years.

¹⁴ Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 10. Like Glucklich, Steven Brena uses a psycho-physical approach analysing religious discourses of chronic pain sufferers in his *Pain and Religion: A Psychophysiological Study* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1972).

¹⁵ Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 11.

individual existence.’¹⁶ The turn from the self toward something greater than the self, such as the community or a ‘higher being’, is inbuilt into many religious ceremonies. Additionally, according to Glucklich, the goal of sacred pain is ‘to transform the pain that causes suffering into a pain that leads to insight, meaning, and even salvation,’ to which I would add self-empowerment.¹⁷ The participant emerges feeling stronger, more in control, and, in communal ceremonies, the shared experience brings participants out of a sense of isolation and alienation to a closer relationship with each other and the community.

One example of this process discussed by Glucklich is that of the Sun Dance, which he describes as ‘a sacrificial performance, for the good of others, for the purification of one’s own community, and for the improvement of the world.’¹⁸ It is a controversial practice among the Mi’kmaq (see below). In one version of this Plains Indian ceremony, the chest is pierced by a claw, bone or piece of wood, which is attached with a rope to a central pole. The social role of the Sun Dance is to reconcile the individual with the collective, exemplified in the experience of Aztec/Yaqui author Manny Twofeathers. During the Sun Dance, in which he experiences intense pain as his flesh is torn away from his chest, he undergoes a self-transformation ‘from personal to community identification.’¹⁹ Twofeathers says after being pierced, ‘I felt pain, but I also felt that closeness with the Creator. I felt like crying for all the people who needed my prayers.’²⁰ The experience of intense physical pain brought about emotional counterparts, such as compassion, fear and courage, which enabled him to overcome his alienation and feel closer to the Creator as well as his children, for whom he performed the Sun Dance.²¹ As Glucklich shows, someone who engages in ceremonies that entail physical pain undergoes a transformative process, from identifying with the self to identifying with the community, and from personal suffering to compassion for others.

In trying to understand why people hurt themselves in religious contexts generally, Glucklich’s study is appropriately cross-cultural, but to understand ceremonial suffering in a First Nations context specifically, it is necessary to explore accounts of First Nations’ perspectives. What is not explored in Glucklich’s account are the cosmological views underlying the idea among many indigenous people that the greater the voluntary suffering the greater the healing, perhaps seen as a ‘gift-exchange’ with Spirit. One cosmological model for understanding First Nations’ views about sweat lodges and fasting is suggested by

¹⁶ Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 6.

¹⁷ Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 40.

¹⁸ Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 144.

¹⁹ Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 146-7.

²⁰ Quoted in Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 148.

²¹ Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 149.

Harvey Feit, who describes a reciprocal relationship between Cree hunters and the environment, using the language of gift-exchange. When the hunter has a vision of an animal before the hunt and indeed finds that animal, ‘that is an indicator of power.’²² Feit stresses that power is not possessed by the hunter and, since it is a gift, ‘the hunter is under obligation to respect that gift by reciprocating with gifts of his own.’²³ The recipients are other members of the group who share in the food, while the ‘hunter also reciprocates to the spirits who have participated in the hunt.’ Thus, in traditional hunting communities, reciprocity is the basis for establishing a healthy relationship with others in the community, which includes non-human beings. ‘Many Cree rituals follow a similar structure,’ Feit comments, though he does not elaborate.²⁴ It may be inferred that a similar worldview underlies concepts of healing and prayer in many First Nations cultures. The language of gift-exchange can be employed to describe the actions and expectations of participants in Mi’kmaq-led ceremonies where the physical ordeal is offered as a sacrifice in order to receive power and healing.

For some, the preference for ‘indigenous’ as opposed to other sources of ritual practice is connected to resistance to colonialism. From the 1970s, Mi’kmaq activists began to explore ways of reviving traditional spirituality as an alternative to Catholicism, the dominant religion among the Mi’kmaq. As Harald Prins observes, ‘many turn to their aboriginal past for cultural guidance into the future.’²⁵ They also went out to learn ceremonies from neighbouring First Nations, including the Sioux (or Lakota). Prins argues that just because a tradition is new it is no less culturally valid. One of the first ceremonies to be adopted by the Mi’kmaq was the sweat lodge. Prins was informed that the Mi’kmaq follow ‘the physically more challenging’ ‘Sioux Way’, which has twenty-four stones, rather than the ‘Cree Way’, which has only twelve stones. Prins adds that the latter way is regarded ‘with a measure of disdain.’²⁶ Conversely, very hot sweat lodges are commended. Anthropologist Raymond Bucko mentions in *The Lakota Ritual of the Sweat Lodge* (1998) that when someone says to a sweat lodge keeper that the ceremony was very hot it is always

²² Harvey A. Feit, “Hunting and the Quest for Power: The James Bay Cree and Whitemen in the 20th Century,” in *Native Peoples: the Canadian Experience*, edited by R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (McClelland & Stewart, 2nd edition, 1995), Part I: The Contemporary Cree Hunting Culture, <http://arcticcircle.uconn.edu/HistoryCulture/Cree/Feit1/feit1.html>.

²³ Feit, “Hunting and the Quest for Power,” Part I.

²⁴ Feit, “Hunting and the Quest for Power,” Part I.

²⁵ Harald E.L. Prins, “Neo-Traditions in Native Communities: Sweat lodge and Sun Dance Among the Micmac Today,” in *Actes du Vingt-Cinquième Congrès des Algonquinistes*, edited by William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994), 385, 392.

²⁶ Prins, “Neo-Traditions in Native Communities,” 390.

taken as approval. This is illustrated by an anecdote provided by a non-Indian who led a sweat lodge ceremony attended by a sceptical Lakota medicine man:

At the end, he commented on how hot it was. He thought he would be let off the hook and it would be an easy sweat because I would not know what to do. It was what is referred to as a strong sweat.²⁷

This attitude was conveyed by Mi'kmaq participants in a sweat lodge ceremony I attended during the Conne River powwow in 2003. One said that 'it was really hot', which the leader took as a compliment. Two of us, both women, did not react to the extreme heat and were said to be 'tough' followed by the comment that 'women are tougher than men'. If a sweat was 'weak' (not very hot), it was often referred to as a 'beginners' sweat'. From these brief statements, it appears that many Mi'kmaq have favoured sweat lodge ceremonies that involve greater physical suffering. According to Prins, 'Traditionally, the Mi'kmaq believed that some of the most powerful "medicine" came in visions induced by some difficult ordeal.'²⁸ This attitude continues in the recently reconstituted Mi'kmaq traditions, including that of fasting, an intense period of prayer and abstinence from food, normally undertaken in isolation.

Fasting for several days or more is a common practice among contemporary Mi'kmaq spiritual leaders, spoken of as a first step or requirement before one can progress further in their role. One Mi'kmaq from New Brunswick, Joey Paul, told me he 'fasted for his pipe' for five and a half days with the help of an elder, before receiving a pipe that would be employed in communal ceremonies, thus marking him out as a spiritual leader. An Eskasoni Mi'kmaq said he once fasted and 'had a vision for a ceremony for the sea, a flesh offering, so a strong ceremony.' Another Eskasoni Mi'kmaq said he returned to his own place after visiting the Cree and others and 'fasted and tried to learn what the Mi'kmaw way was. This was in the eleventh year of my sobriety' – indicating the kind of journey he had been on. As a practice, fasting appears in a Mi'kmaq legend recorded by American folklorist Charles Leland in the late nineteenth century, cited by Robert Campbell, in which the Mi'kmaq cultural hero, Glooscap (or Kluskap), 'through fasting and living an exemplary life, is able to bring grandmother back from death.'²⁹ In this case, it is an offering of self-discipline in exchange for another's life. It is generally perceived that fasting is undertaken not just for the individual

²⁷ Raymond Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual of the Sweat Lodge: History and Contemporary Practice* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 228.

²⁸ Prins, *The Mi'kmaq*, 72.

²⁹ Robert A. Campbell, "Bridging Sacred Canopies: Mi'kmaq Spirituality and Catholicism," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 18, 2 (1998): 306.

but for the benefit of others in the community. In 1975, a young Mi'kmaq from Nova Scotia said he undertook a three-day fast: 'I wanted to do this for myself and for my people, I think I was the only Indian to do this for a long time. It made me feel good... I gave my gift to the great spirit.'³⁰ In this statement, he expresses a view that corresponds with both Glucklich's theory that these practices bring about a psychological transformation, and also the notion of 'gift-exchange' highlighted in Feit's paper.

While the sweat lodge ceremony and fasting are generally accepted and still performed widely among the Mi'kmaq today, the even more 'gruelling religious practice' of the Sun Dance has had a more hostile reception, often regarded as a culturally alien practice.³¹ The first Sun Dance held on the Eskasoni reserve on Cape Breton Island was led by Sioux, but most Mi'kmaq objected to it.³² In 1988, one traditionalist woman who opposed the imported Sioux practices said:

Do not follow their ways, they are of a very different tribe; he whoever does that abuse to their minds and bodies as well as others, must be of a violent past...Do you really believe that this is truly our past also, if so then we, your people are very disappointed in our forefathers... I am not trying to condemn you, but I do not care for their inhumane ways.³³

She objected to the Sun Dance and other Plains Indian ceremonies not only because they were imported but because they were a form of 'abuse', stemming from violence. Nevertheless, violence has been a part of the Mi'kmaq experience, too, historically through colonialism and then since the establishment of the reserve system.

'Suffering' is both something individual Mi'kmaq might be carrying within themselves, in terms of bodily, psychological and social suffering, and expressed in or mirrored by the physical ordeal that is endured in some ceremonies. First of all, there are certain moments in a sweat lodge ceremony that allow for the sharing of communal and personal suffering. The sweat lodge traditionally has four rounds, representing four areas of life or society. For example, in the first Mi'kmaq sweat lodge I attended, in 2003, in the second round we were asked to pray for those who were lost through drugs and alcohol. The prayers focused on members of the community – children, friends and family who were ill or needing help. In the final round, healing for the self was sought and thanks given for the good

³⁰ Quoted in Prins, "Neo-Traditions in Native Communities," 387.

³¹ Prins, "Neo-Traditions in Native Communities," 390.

³² Prins, "Neo-Traditions in Native Communities," 391.

³³ Quoted in Prins, "Neo-Traditions in Native Communities," 392.

that had already been received; surviving the residential school experience was mentioned on a number of occasions.

Shubenacadie, open from 1930 until 1967 in Nova Scotia, was the only Indian Residential School in Atlantic Canada. Ironically, Shubenacadie is a Mi'kmaw word – 'place where wild potatoes grow' – although speaking Mi'kmaw was forbidden at the school. It was a place of lost childhoods, abuse, abandonment and estrangement from the community. 'Not only were Aboriginal communities distressed by the separation of children from their communities, native language and heritage, but the tragedy was worsened by the existence of physical and sexual abuse that has become evident in some parts of the sordid system.'³⁴ Several Mi'kmaq I spoke to referred to their experience of residential schooling as a central part of their journey toward becoming a spiritual leader, carrying the pipe for the people. Joey Paul of New Brunswick, who said he was one of the first to bring the sweat lodge to the Maritimes, explained in an interview that as a child he was 'kidnapped' and taken to a residential school. Back on the reserve six years later, 'there was prejudice against me when I returned, so I turned to nature, animals. Other kids mocked me for not speaking Mi'kmaw.' He said he was born to become a spiritual leader. 'No knowledge can make you one. You have to go and fast.'³⁵ In other words, it is gained through physical effort, not learning. It is interesting to note that it was the rupture caused by his boarding school experience which prompted him to look to different cultures and their traditions. Disconnected from his own community, he sought guidance from other First Nations, including the Sioux, Cree and Mohawk, bringing back the sweat lodge and other ceremonies to the Mi'kmaq.

Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe spent four years of her childhood in Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, an experience she examines in her autobiography, *Song of Rita Joe* (1996). Born in 1932 in Cape Breton and orphaned at five, she once hid from an Indian agent

³⁴ Martin Thornton, "Aspects of the History of Aboriginal People in their Relationship with Colonial, National and Provincial Governments in Canada," in *Aboriginal People and Other Canadians: Shaping New Relationships*, edited by Martin Thornton and Roy Todd, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 13. There are a number of studies on abuses that took place in the residential school system in Canada, such as Assembly of First Nations, *Breaking the Silence: An Interpretive Study of Residential School Impact and Healing as Illustrated by the Stories of First Nations Individuals* (Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations, 1994) and J.R. Miller's historical study of residential schools, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). See also Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia 1900-1950* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998). For a list of others, see Jean Barman, "Aboriginal Education at the Crossroads: The Legacy of Residential Schools and the Way Ahead." In *Visions of the Heart: Canadian Aboriginal Issues*, edited by David Allan Long and Olive Patricia Dickason (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 271-303. For a Mi'kmaq account of the impact of colonisation, including residential schooling, see Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not The Savages: Collision between European and Native American Civilizations* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 3rd edition, 2006).

³⁵ Owen, *Appropriation*, 123, 140.

and lived in different homes until age twelve when, frightened of the drinking among the adults at home, she decided to enter Shubenacadie voluntarily. Years later, Rita and her husband, who had also attended the school, went to visit one of the nuns who had taught them. Her husband vented his anger at the nun, and then said, ‘Sister, I don’t hate you... It’s just that I was hurt so much when I was in there, and Rita was hurt and a lot of us were hurt.’³⁶ ‘For a whole year after I first came out of residential school,’ Rita explains, ‘I never went near a church. I misplaced the anger I felt about the regimentation of spiritual life in that school.’³⁷ Just before the building was knocked down, they went to see it. Rita’s husband recalled the spirits of dead children in the building, leading Rita to reflect, ‘Today, I think of spirits that appear anywhere on this earth as being the result of trauma... Over the years, so much trauma had happened in the residential school – so many people were hurt – that it played itself over and over again through the spirits.’³⁸ Her own personal experience of trauma led her to an awareness of all those who suffered in the residential school.

Rita’s first sweat lodge ceremony, led by Donna Augustine, was very hot. It was a women’s sweat – ‘more powerful’ than the men’s, she says, without further explanation.³⁹ She also emphasises the importance of this ceremony for prayer:

There were times, when I was a little girl, when I prayed to be delivered from whatever misery I was encountering, and it didn’t happen. The misery went on and on. And then you have the unhappy realization that religion doesn’t always come across for you. But prayer does help. It is possible to receive an answer. Often, when you are in the sweatlodge and you are praying, you get an immediate thought, an answer, right inside your head.⁴⁰

Referring to the return of the sweatlodge ceremony and other traditions, Rita acknowledges that some ‘are still afraid of it – our brainwashing has been thorough.’ Despite this, the ‘Sacred Pipe is still being used, the sweatlodge continues – in all of this, it is the cleansing of the mind and spirit that remains uppermost in my people’s minds.’⁴¹ The healing process involves, in her view, a reclamation of traditional practices and values.

Another form of suffering experienced by many Mi’kmaq is alienation. In a piece he wrote in 2008, Randolph Bowers, a trained counsellor, says he returned home from Australia

³⁶ Rita Joe, with Lynn Henry, *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi’kmaq Poet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 48.

³⁷ Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 56.

³⁸ Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 57.

³⁹ Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 146-7.

⁴⁰ Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 151.

⁴¹ Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 154.

to investigate his roots and Mi'kmaq approaches to healing. He felt he had an 'isolated and alienated childhood' in Nova Scotia and 'faced much abuse at school.'

Looking back from a professional educator's perspective, it is difficult to conclude otherwise but that the people around me then were prejudicial and unable to get beyond their own limited beliefs and values. But in the long run, these experiences made me stronger. As the years went on I developed a keen sense of compassion and empathy for people in pain.⁴²

In Australia, aboriginal elders challenged him to reconnect with and learn from his own people, the Mi'kmaq, a heritage he had not really acknowledged. 'This identity confusion caused me much pain. But what I realised during vision quest down under was that my Ancestors also carried pain.'⁴³

His identity confusion stems from being a non-status Indian – his father's side were of Mi'kmaq and Acadian French descent and had all but lost any connection to their indigenous heritage after 'generations of shame and denial'.⁴⁴ He writes:

But to heal from those years of alienation, my identity needed to grow strong in other ways – by seeking solitude I found my path in life... By facing my hurt and confusion, something told me that there will always be a new day...⁴⁵

The Mi'kmaq spiritual traditions he found back home enabled him to find healing. 'In facing myself, my history and heritage was brought into the light of Mi'kmaq prayer and ceremony.'⁴⁶ He gives thanks for his early spiritual awakenings that allowed him to 'come into a body-awareness'; then at this point, his thoughts turn to others:

My spirit prays with great concern today. Our children and youth are forced into such harsh circumstances in our cities and our violent communities before their spirits have time to gain strength and to awaken.⁴⁷

Bowers considers himself part of the 'lost generation'. Although he himself did not go to residential school, many of his cousins did. He refers to 'trans-generational trauma', sometimes specifically referring to the residential school era.⁴⁸ He thinks they each need to play a part in 'healing our bloodlines'.

⁴² Randolph Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi'kmaq* (Mi'kmaq Resource Centre Special Collection: University of Cape Breton, 2008), 10. http://mikmawey.uccb.ns.ca/Rsrchrprt_Reconnectng_bowers_08.pdf

⁴³ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi'kmaq*, 11.

⁴⁴ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi'kmaq*, 29.

⁴⁵ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi'kmaq*, 19.

⁴⁶ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi'kmaq*, 18.

⁴⁷ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi'kmaq*, 19.

⁴⁸ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi'kmaq*, 32, 36.

Yes many people have allowed these traumas to define their lives. Many have lived their lives as victims – myself included. But many of us also find our strength once again...⁴⁹

After exploring his own healing process and the methods he has learned, Bowers provides insights for a cultural form of ‘counselling and healing based in the spirituality and spiritual ceremony and practices of Mi’kmaw People’ that includes an ‘awareness and appreciation of the challenges still faced today that are based in the history of colonisation, oppression, and trauma faced by Mi’kmaw People’ and ‘understanding of the impact of the residential schools on Mi’kmaw and other native communities, and of the healing work that is ahead.’⁵⁰ He emphasises the importance of ceremony in this work.⁵¹

As well as residential schooling, recovery from drugs and alcohol abuse is often mentioned as a reason for turning to traditional spirituality. Eleanor Alwyn, in her research of the Conne River Mi’kmaq, discusses the effect of alcoholism on families and the community and the use of ceremonies to aid healing. ‘They have experienced the ability to heal from what one man called “the wobbly road” through the sweat lodge and other ceremonies, but mainly through the support of their community.’⁵² The importance of community in the healing of the individual is highlighted. During the 2003 Conne River powwow, often Newfoundland Mi’kmaq said they were motivated to heal themselves for the sake of the children of the community. As Mi’kmaq heal their past trauma and present suffering, they strengthen their future as a community.

These examples show that for many indigenous people the concept of healing is intimately intertwined with the community, and this will be explored in a different indigenous context in chapter 10. According to sociologist Geoffrey Mercer, ‘the Aboriginal definition of “health” extends beyond medically defined health outcomes to highlight physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being [which is] located in traditional culture and spirituality.’⁵³ He discusses indigenous concepts of health as being inseparable from family, community and the world, represented as a circle. Mercer quotes Joan Feather, who says:

⁴⁹ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi’kmaq*, 31, 32.

⁵⁰ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi’kmaq*, 26.

⁵¹ Bowers, *Reconnecting with the Mi’kmaq*, 27.

⁵² Eleanor Alwyn, “Circletalk: If We Don’t Know Where We Come From, We Don’t Know Where We’re Going” (paper presented at the Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge conference, 2004). <http://www.ed.psu.edu/icik/2004ConferenceProceedings.html>

⁵³ Geoffrey Mercer, “Aboriginal Peoples: Health and Healing” in *Aboriginal People and Other Canadians: Shaping New Relationships*, edited by Martin Thornton and Roy Todd (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 144.

The circle (or wheel) embodies the notion of health as harmony or balance in all aspects of one's life... [Human beings] must be in balance with [their] physical and social environments... in order to live and grow. Imbalance can threaten the conditions that enable the person... to reach his or her full potential as a human being.⁵⁴

This concept of community is also found among Mi'kmaq. 'The circle is found everywhere. Unity,' stated one Eskasoni Mi'kmaq, explaining that he observed this among the Cree, Sioux and other Nations.⁵⁵ The concept of the circle or wheel as representing harmony and balance has become pervasive among First Nations, especially among those who have incorporated Plains Indian ceremonies such as the sweat lodge and the Sun Dance, both of which are circular in structure. This is also noted by Glen McCabe when describing the use of the 'medicine wheel' or circle, representing 'balance' and 'harmony', as a tool in counselling.⁵⁶

Additionally, the community healing described by Mercer involves a 'search for causes well beyond individual circumstances.'⁵⁷ Referring to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples of 1996, Mercer alludes to the impact of centuries of colonialism:

Healing, in Aboriginal terms, refers to personal and societal recovery from lasting effects of oppression and systematic racism experienced over generations. Many Aboriginal people are suffering not simply from specific diseases and social problems, but also from a depression of spirit resulting from 200 or more years damage to their cultures, languages, identities and self-respect.⁵⁸

Concurring with this view, McCabe highlights the healing role of the sweat lodge:

The power of the sweat lodge is a symbol of cultural integrity for Aboriginal people and serves as a reminder of the value and beauty of the traditional ways, which, in turn, encourages belief in self and community and creates hope for the future. These are two very important factors in overcoming the problems brought on by colonization and oppression.⁵⁹

It is clear that indigenous healing involves more than the individual and therefore that collective forms of healing are likely to be more effective as ways to recover a sense of community. Ceremonies provide a context for this to take place. Also, there is not one

⁵⁴ Quoted in Mercer, "Aboriginal Peoples," 144.

⁵⁵ Owen, *Appropriation*, 125.

⁵⁶ Glen McCabe, "Mind, body, emotions and spirit: reaching to the ancestors for healing," *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 21, 2 (2008): 145.

⁵⁷ Mercer, "Aboriginal Peoples," 144.

⁵⁸ Mercer, "Aboriginal Peoples," 156.

⁵⁹ McCabe, "Mind, body, emotions and spirit," 158.

indigenous healing method, but rather ones that are Cree, Mi'kmaq, etc., as well as particular methods for urban, reserve and other contexts, as the healing needs to be rooted in community in a way that addresses that community's heritage, traditions and needs.

In the Mi'kmaq accounts discussed here, suffering is endured in a ceremonial context as a form of gift-exchange – offered in return for individual and community healing – and as a tool for transformation in order to recover from oppression, abuse and alienation resulting from colonial methods that created social divisions, including forced relocations onto reserves, the separation of children from their families and the distinction between status and non-status Mi'kmaq. Ariel Glucklich recognises that voluntary self-hurting in a religious context can act as a psychological analgesic, replacing the sense of isolation with one of identification with something greater than the self, such as the community. Traditional ceremonies are perceived as facilitating a reciprocal relationship with Spirit that can bring about healing and transformation, enabling participants to overcome trauma resulting from residential school abuse and community or family breakdown, highlighted by several individuals at the Conne River powwow and in Rita Joe's autobiography, and enable Mi'kmaq, including those without Indian status such as Randolph Bowers, to come to terms with their identity and heritage within a supportive structure where more appropriate relationships are modelled as a means of remediating painful ones.

Enduring an intense physical ordeal during a ceremony can be a way of expressing or expunging past suffering. Although this might make this activity appear to be a culturally acceptable form of self-harming, its beneficial effects are far reaching and all of those who spoke about their experiences of these forms of prayer say they have gained strength and healing from them. Prayer with pain in a ceremonial context, linking the individual to community and its traditions, can offer a way to transform personal suffering into the empowerment gained through a shared healing experience, undertaken for the greater good of the people.

Suzanne Owen, 'Prayer with Pain: Ceremonial Suffering among the Mi'kmaq,' in J. Fear-Segal and R. Tillett (eds) *Indigenous Bodies: Reviewing, Relocating, Reclaiming* (State University of New York Press – forthcoming 2013), chapter 9