

**Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, November 2007**

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**Human Rights Conference November 1, 2007**

My column this month is a speech I gave at the Human Rights conference in Saskatoon on November 1<sup>st</sup>. I want to share it with you for many reasons which I think I state in the speech, but mostly I share it out of the concern for our children and the powerlessness that many of us feel to make things better for them. I do this with respect.

I am not very knowledgeable on Human Rights issues at a national or international level as my work has always been in the community as a front line worker and as an artist. Like little sister mouse who guards the south door of our lodge I am so busy with the work I have to do that I seldom look anywhere else. I guess I should, but it seems like there is just never enough time.

I've had good friends over the years whose political work with our people has been intertwined with the human rights movement and I have to say that many hours have been spent in discussion and debate as I didn't always agree, nor did they with me, on the role of human rights in our lives.

Its not that I don't believe in human rights, because I believe our rights are inherent, we see that in the cultural and spiritual teachings and knowledge of our people. What has always bothered me is that so much energy and money has gone into trying to established laws about Human Rights for Indigenous peoples when the idea of those Human Rights are not grounded in our culture—but rather are grounded in a culture of dominance and patriarchy and only involves the rights of human beings and doesn't acknowledge the rights of all our relations—animals, birds, the land, or the spiritual realm. I also believe that the Human Rights movement has often robbed our

communities of good minds and leadership because they have focused on issues external to our culture.

I don't wish to offend anyone I appreciate and honor the work that has been done I am only raising the things I think about, often get frustrated about, and sometimes get very angry about, which of course is what fuels my work so I want to talk about home and community this morning, about teachings, traditions and experiences.

This past summer an old man gave me seven rocks. He found them about 4 ft in the ground as he was digging his well, they are all different sizes, the largest the size of a baseball and the smallest like a large marble. They are all perfectly round.

He told me to fast and to meditate with them and use them in my work. Well, as I was thinking of this gathering several weeks ago and wondering what I would do, one of these rocks came into my consciousness. It reminded me about relationships and about creation.

There is a word in my language it is "wahkotowin." Today it is translated to mean kinship, relationship, family, as in human family. But once, from our place it meant the whole of creation. And our teachings tell us that all of creation is related and interconnected to all things within it and Wahkootowin means honoring and respecting those relationships. There are stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death, over and over again our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. Our whole environment, our world in turn also had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us.

Many of us use the metaphor of circle all the time, we say holistic, all my relations the list of words we use is long. We use the metaphor so much that it has become a cliché

and yet the thinking of whole is seldom, if ever, reflected in our work or our lives. There are many, many examples of a broken Wahkootowin in every city and community across Canada. Examples we all know well... the incredible poverty and abuse of our children. Kids being brutalized by family and community members every single day. Kids who have no place to go, nothing to eat, no place to sleep and we wonder why they are joining gangs.

And lets not forget the brutal rapes, the continuous disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women. What can I say? How many Aboriginal men, in particular aboriginal leaders have you heard stand up and say "this is going to stop!" None. Of course not, it's considered a woman's issue. Woman's business. Well lets move away from women and children and go to a community, the Lubicon Lake Cree Nation in north central Alberta for example.

They are 'relatives' who were left out of the treaty signing in the nineteenth century and so are called non-status Indians despite the fact that they are one of the first peoples of this country.

For the last sixty years the Lubicon, with this uncertain legal status, have fought for their rights as Aboriginal, as Cree, people while being over run by massive oil, gas and logging exploitation that has destroyed their traditional lands and way of life. As a result they struggle to protect themselves and to secure a future for their children. "We are hanging on by our finger nails and we don't know how much longer we can last." Chief Ominiyak said when I last talked to him.

I first worked with the Lubicon in the 1960's and again in the 1990's, I can't even begin to describe the pain of watching a way of life die.

No other Indigenous people should continue to pursue their rights without requiring that other nations acknowledge and honour the rights of the Lubicon Cree. This is wakotowin, to take care of each other. Instead we've accepted the separation of our people into categories of Status, Non Status, Halfbreed, Métis, Bill C 31 and as a result of Bill C 31 probably a whole list of other categories, and the sad thing is we accepted them until we've made them sacred and left our people, our babies, with no birthright, no homelands, no culture and no traditions. I seen this all the time in the many years of working with women and children in crisis and I see it today in my work with the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company. Nobody wants responsibility. No body wants to be related. The artwork, the music, stories of the youth we work with at SNTC reflects that alienation and marginalization.

The way our culture treats the earth and the way its treats women and children are closely linked. Think about it. Women are sinners therefore babies are born of sin. All are identified with the flesh, the body, the bloody process of bringing life into the world and its inevitable end of death and decay. When that cycle is devalued, when what is sacred becomes abstract, removed from earth, transcending life and death without being marked by cycles of life, the earth, women and children are denigrated and become the victims of exploitation, assault and rape.

Never mind what the outside world is doing to us, we need to think about what **WE** are doing to each other.

We can fool ourselves by saying "We're resilient and we'll survive" or that "non-interference is cultural" or even "Its not that bad and your playing into governments hands by talking like that." But we need to think about how in Aboriginal communities we've been conditioned not to openly criticize our governments, our leadership, the processes of land claims and rights-based causes and therefore we don't engage in

critical analysis of ourselves because we are told that to do this will be seen as putting our people, our communities, down.

Can't, Cant', Can't—turn the other cheek, suppress anger, suppress pain until we can't feel anything anymore and our brains stop working—this is the legacy of colonialism.

My role as an artist is to mirror back and right now it's hard to look in the mirror because of the shame. Shame runs deep in our communities. I believe it was author belle hook, who said "Shame is the result of an injury to the soul." And that reminds me of the little girl in Melfort who was sexually assaulted by the three men.

And in the midst of all of this, our leaders pursue self government, land claims, hunting and fishing rights cases, and self-determination without healing what is broken in our families, our communities, our cultures first.

I believe that healing and self-government go hand and hand, but I also believe that an unhealthy, unbalanced people or community can get stuck forever in healing mode. But at some point we have to move on if we don't we're going to lose our children and if we lose our children we lose everything. ....And so, I don't know how Human Rights legislation, not grounded in the principles of Wahkotowin can be of any use to us.

My late father was a traditional man and by that I mean he spent his entire life living on the land. He spoke very little English and although he was baptized, he was never a practicing Christian. I tell you this because it is important to this story.

We, all his children, came home every summer with our kids and always when he called us from the village office to see when we were arriving, we would remind him to be sure to have lots of wild meat.

We arrived home one summer evening and, as we sat down to eat, my brother, after taking a bite of his meat said...“This is beef dad. What happened?”

Dad didn't say anything for a moment but he appeared very emotional, which was unusual for him. “I hunted for two days he said, I never saw anything until last night when I was coming home. As I reached the point I looked up and there was a big old moose in the water. I pulled the boat up close and he watched me as I got my rifle, aimed and sighted it. I was just about to pull the trigger when I looked into its eyes, “Why are you going to kill me Danny” he said. “I always gave myself to you and your family never went hungry. Now they are grown up and they are coming home with lots of groceries.”

We were all silent as Dad's eyes welled with tears. “That old moose was right.” He said. “He took good care of us and now we don't need him. I forgot he was my relative.”

Dad gave all his guns away that summer and never hunted again nor did he support hunting rights for just everybody. “If an old man like me, who's suppose to know better, can forget his relationship and obligation to his relatives, then how can a person who's never been taught the good way, hunt with respect?” In the world of my dad's Wahkotowin, animals just as humans, have inherent rights. As Aboriginal peoples our spiritual and ideological rupture from the loss of Wahkotowin is reflected in every aspect of our culture.

The “lovelessness” that abounds in aboriginal life is painful...It just bloody hurts. We need to start being kind to one another, start treating each other like relatives and practicing those principals of Wakotowin and that is free.