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### **Better to celebrate children than death and dying**

It is almost impossible not to feel paralyzed at the thought of another suicide; especially that of a child.

Paralyzed, not just as a parent, but also as a community. Like many of us, I ask myself what I can do? How can I change what is happening to our children and to us but like most people I talk to I am at a loss.

I remember running away from home when I was about eight years old. It was not because of one particular thing although I remember what triggered it. It was a lifetime of horrific ups and downs. Of incredible joy and love but also incredible fear and hopelessness, all rolled up into a bundle too big for a little girl to carry, much less understand.

I started out walking and thinking about how I would kill myself. Imagining my funeral and how mom and aunties would make me a pretty dress. My dad and uncles would make me a beautiful coffin and all the weeping and prayers that would be said and the people hugging each other, helping to make my funeral beautiful, all the food that would be cooked, the feasting that would be done.

We can fix it by celebrating life, our children's lives, letting them know that they are special and we love them.

I stopped at a small muskeg and decided that I would just walk into the water and get sucked up and die. But then I thought, but what if nobody finds me? There would be no celebration, no one to talk about how wonderful I had been or about the things I had done.

So, what's my point?

My point is that 70 years ago I observed how important and loved you could be if you were dead. And my point today is, nothing has changed. As Indigenous people, our greatest celebrations are still about dying, death and funerals, one of the great colonial gifts.

How often do you see a hospital room full of women singing birthing songs when a baby is coming?

How often do you sit in a community hall with all the people taking part in a Naming or a Walking Out Ceremony to celebrate a baby's life?

How often do we celebrate a young man's first vision quest or a young woman's first moon-time? Almost never, but when somebody is dying we fill the hospital room and all the waiting rooms, we spend our money in cafeterias feasting.

We cry and have hysterics and this is all carried over after death, to a big community funeral, and in the case of suicides, we bring in "outsiders" to help our children deal with the loss.

There was, of course, very little money, if any, to help that child when he or she was alive.

What kind of message does that give our children, especially if they have been made to feel they are useless, stupid and not worthy of anything. If they have been abused in every way possible way and there is no safe place for them anywhere, which is where most of our kids are at today.

Even if they are fortunate enough to have a home and parents, they know through social media, newspapers and television that their lives are not really valued. That there are hotels full of Indigenous children that nobody wants; that there are not enough foster homes to take them.

That our earth is being destroyed and our water polluted, that our country's prisons are full of Indigenous people. They also know that the most important thing in their country today is "Reconciliation " and they don't see themselves in that picture.

Our cultural teachers tell us that children were/are our greatest resource, our most precious. That they represent the future and without them there is nothing.

This love of children was so powerful that many Europeans, after first contact, recorded what they observed. The Jesuits in the 1500s wrote, that these people "regard children with affectionate, playful and permissive indulgence ... their children are treated like little princesses and princes, they are denied nothing."

Historian Emma Anderson, wrote "children were seen from a young age as autonomous agents whose freedom to develop and learn must be unimpeded. True wisdom was seen as the product of direct, personal experience, they placed a premium upon children's autonomy in their individual learning process. Indigenous children were taught what constituted their culture's most treasured values ... a spirit of competent self-reliance, generous concern for others, and stoicism in the face of cold, privation, and pain."

The missionaries saw this as a huge flaw and started immediately to correct this "spoiling of children" and one of these ways was, of course, through corporal punishment. But perhaps it was the loss of cultural ceremonies and the celebration of children that was the most effective in the brokenness we see today.

Elders who were/are the circle that surrounded children, representing the people's past, held/hold the teachings and ceremonies that celebrated the important events in the lives of children. Birthing ceremonies, naming, first tooth, walking out, first hunt and first preparation of food, and finally the celebration of puberty. Becoming an adult and taking up the responsibilities and obligations to your people and your world.

These were spiritual and social ceremonies that celebrated the importance of children and the people's love for them. These ceremonies were momentous events that shaped the adult the child would become.

It is these ceremonies with their special songs and prayers that I believe are missing in our contemporary world. There is no celebration of life and yet, there is so much to celebrate. We have a culture, traditions, and values that have survived the dark history of our country and the many kind, generous, loving people in every community who hold us together and lift us up, people whose strength keeps us from completely going over the edge.

So, what can we do, how can we change what is happening? We can speak up for our kids and clean our homes and communities of drugs, alcohol, incest, and all forms of abuse and violence.

We can stop denying, ignoring and pretending that this is not happening or that it will go away, or that government and money will fix it. Only we can do that. We can fix it by celebrating life, our children's lives, letting them know that they are special and we love them.

Let's face it, it doesn't matter how you cut it, a Christian Baptism, a Happy Birthday party, or a tooth fairy will never do it for us.

There is nothing wrong with those things, they are beautiful, and they are just not ours. Those ceremonies do not touch that ancient part of us that is Indigenous to this land and the ancient part that we have to "wake up."

Just like that beautiful old morning song.

"Wunskak, pe wahpun ooma. Ahsi peyasisuk nikumowuk, pe miyonaqun ki taskinow!"

"Wake up, the dawn is coming. Already the little birds are singing, "Our land is beautiful, our land is beautiful."

Ekosi, Hiy Hiy, marci.