

**Indigenous Ceremony and Traditional Knowledge:
Exploring their use as models for healing the impacts of traumatic experiences**

by

Sheila A. Nyman
B.S.W., University of Victoria, 2012

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Using Indigenous methodology and a story telling method this thesis is the result of research that looks at the benefits of traditional Indigenous ceremony and healing practices as a way to heal from traumatic experiences. A thematic analysis technique was employed to reveal four themes that emerged from the stories told by Indigenous Knowledge Keeper participants. The first theme is the importance of our *connection* to all living things including our own selves. Another is recognizing our greatest teachers *nature and animals*. *Cleansing* emerged at the center of all traditional healing strategies and the final theme encompasses all that we are as life on this planet *spirit or energy*.

Trauma can be understood as any event that creates difficulty for the individual to cope whether the event that caused the experience was purposeful or accidental. While people do find amazing ways to cope with circumstances that are overwhelming, neurobiology tells us how trauma is processed and impacts the workings of the brain. Trauma in the nervous system can be understood as the *result* of a person or group or community's inability to stay safe or to feel safe during the experiences. Indigenous people live with the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma caused by colonization including the Indian Residential School experience, as well as ongoing systemic oppression. All traumas can activate the deeply held

traumas that have been transmitted trans-generationally. In essence we carry intergenerational traumas. I believe that Indigenous people were practicing healing on a regular basis within their traditional ceremonies, dances and practices before contact and these practices may inform a model of health and wellness that could be useful in healing the effects of trauma that impacts Indigenous people today. Ceremonies and traditional teachings were shared communally before contact and are now being revived as we embrace the cultural practices of our ancestors across this land. Within our Indigenous ways of knowing we recognize that we are related to everything in creation we are connected and depend on one another. In 1884, under the Potlatch Law & section 141 of the Indian Act our ceremonies, spiritual practices and traditional knowledges were made illegal; our people were imprisoned for practicing them (*UBC First Nations Studies, 2009*). Today we are in a state of desperation for healing strategies that work for who we are as a people. The Elders in this research shared how this can be done.

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Huy Tseep qa Siem nu Siiya'yu (thank you my friends and relatives)I hold my hands up..... to the ancestors of this land.

Lim 'limpt (thank you) people of the Sunueymuxw Territory this beautiful land that I am visiting, working and learning on, lim 'limpt for allowing me to be here. Lim 'limpt to the Coast Salish ancestors and people of the Songhess Lekwungen and Esquimalt Wyomilth Nations who are so generous in sharing their territorial lands with the University of Victoria.

I wish to acknowledge the Knowledge Keepers who willing shared their wisdom and stories for the purpose of this thesis, they are, Doll Barber (Marsel) the matriarch of my family who is most commonly known by everyone as Auntie Doll, Victor and Joyce Underwood, Gerry Ambers and Levi Martin.

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All My Relations

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this to my ancestors whose strength and wisdom has sustained me all of my life, even when I did not recognize them. And to Aunty Doll who always reminded me of where I belonged.

And to my Mom, Kay Davis and my sister, Marcy Pickell, who have survived with me and to my brothers Leonard, Raymond, John and Norman who shared my early years and who lost their lives way too young.

To all of my children who gave me purpose and who I love with my life.....Moses, Luke, Melissa, Christian. And to my “shirt tail” daughters Lisa, Tamara and Pam.

I dedicate this to my grandchildren Kristopher (lost to us but always in our hearts), Cody, Will, Brigette, Sheila, Justin, Kyler, Keyanna and Sade and my great grand-daughter Dessie (my soul medicine).

I have spawned a village.....

Chapter 1

*In the scars of my knees you can see children torn from their
families bludgeoned into government schools*

You can see through the pins in my bones that we are prisoners of a long war

My knee is so badly wounded no one will look at it

The pus of the past oozes from every pore

This infection has gone on for at least 300 years

Our sacred beliefs have been made into pencil names of cities gas stations

My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly

Anger is my crutch I hold myself upright with it

My knee is wounded see how

I Am Still Walking

— “*Not Vanishing*” (Chrystos, 1988)

My Personal Location

Way7, my name is Sheila; my spirit name is “Stands Strong, like a rock, Bear Woman” this name was given to me by my traditional teacher, Aline LaFlamme, upon my completion of six “Spirit (Vision) Quest” ceremonies. I am a mixed Syilx (Okanagan) woman from the Lower Similkameen in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. I am a member of the Métis Nation of British Columbia, though I identify myself as Syilx. My maternal two times great grandparents are Francois and Sophia Suprenant (Surprise) and Louis and Elizabeth (Lizzy, Elise) Versailles (Marsel); their last names were changed by the Oblates of the Diocese of Nelson, at the mission in Kelowna, British Columbia, in the late 1800s. It is not clear to me why their last names were changed. My great

grandparents were Joseph and Julia Marsel, my grandfather is Fraser Marsel, my mother is Lorraine (Kay) Marsel and my father was Lenard Nyman, a man of Swedish descent. I did not know my paternal family until recently; my mother raised me until I was apprehended, along with my five siblings, in what is termed the “Sixties Scoop”¹ in Canada. From age nine to fourteen I was moved from foster home to foster home until I ran away to my ancestral territory, the Okanagan, just after turning fifteen years old. It was 1969. My quest to find out “who I am” and “where I came from” began with a deep sense of knowing that I am connected. I have been gifted with a sense that I am connected to the past and the future in ways that I still cannot explain; I was drawn to find myself by finding home in the land of my ancestors.

Who Am I?

It is through my experience and practice of Indigenous ceremony that I have come to believe that a link exists between participation in ceremony and the energy moving within my body. I have been learning, experiencing and practicing traditional Indigenous ceremonies, initiations and links to my ancestral teachings/knowledge since 1994. I had lost my way in life for a time and as a result found my way back by embracing the spiritual traditions of my ancestors. I was fortunate to meet a traditional teacher who was willing to mentor me in Indigenous knowledge and practices.

When you stop and do ceremony you literally clear your mind, your heart and your spirit, the answers come freely to you (Joyce Underwood, 2014).

My life as a foster child in and out of various homes did not provide the nurturing foundation I needed to graduate from high school and enter university in my youth. I

¹ The term “Sixties Scoop” was coined by Patrick Johnston, author of the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*.

traveled a different path for many years, which is another story, not for this thesis. I began university in 2008 to secure a degree in social work because of the versatility of this degree. I was introduced to practices of processing trauma energies somatically and the theories of neurophysiology in 2010 when taking a course in Trauma Work at the University of Victoria. I had worked with trauma survivors as a counsellor since 1996, trying to assist women leaving their lives of substance misuse and violence on the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and in other places. I studied counselling at the Vancouver College of Counselling Training in 1995 and went on to develop a highly successful program for women in recovery from using drugs and alcohol in Vancouver. The programs were therapeutic living environments in homelike settings based on empowering woman to learn to live using healthy coping strategies. By the time I resigned in 2007, the society had three homes for women and four integrated programs. Although these programs and homes were for women from all nations, the success came from the foundation I was able to bring, which was based on traditional Indigenous values and teachings, including "Moon Lodge" and the honoring of women as "Life Givers".

My desire to know more of who I am came as I increased my knowledge and practice of our traditional ceremonies. As time went on, I was able to witness the benefits to people who experienced the ceremonies. I wanted to know more about what had happened in my family and what had happened to my people. This led me to want to learn more about our history. My life journey has taught me that the best way to learn about something is to immerse myself in it. I have now been working with Indian Residential School (IRS) Survivors since 2003, first as an IRS National Crisis phone line

counsellor and then as a Resolution Health Support Worker (RHSW). In my role as an RHSW I provided emotional, physical, mental and spiritual support to former IRS students and their families during all stages of the IRS settlement process, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gatherings. Another part of my role involved witnessing the individual stories at the compensation hearings; this is where I gained my deepest understanding of what had happened to my people. This is where I felt the ancestors, this is where I felt the incredible strength of my people in the face of their disclosures, and this is where I became so proud of who I am and where I come from.

There is no doubt that the genocidal policies of the government of Canada to assimilate the First People of this land is the root cause of the struggles and disparities in health and well-being that Indigenous people are experiencing today. The implementation of the Indian residential school system has damaged the strength of our family connections; it will take intense and focused healing to undo the damage. When I think about the numbers of government and church officials that it took to implement “the plan” to “kill the Indian in the child,” and keep that plan running for over 150 years, it makes sense that it will take us many years and resources to undo what has been done and return our families to a place of balance.

Research Question: “Can Indigenous ceremony and traditions heal the negative impacts of traumatic experiences?”

The research topic that I am exploring is Indigenous people’s experience of Traditional Ceremony as a way to cope with the negative impacts of traumatic experiences. Some of the theories that have influenced my thinking about this research and my choice of topic and methodology are derived from my personal journey coming into “my knowing” as an Indigenous woman as well as the work of Peter Levine (2010)

and writings of Gregory Cajete (2000).

While taking the Trauma Work course in 2010, I was introduced to a practice of tracking energy sensations in my body as a way to understand Levine's theory of somatic experiencing². Doing this meant to notice sensations in my body as they changed with the experiences I was having. Learning this was based on the work of Levine (2010) who states on his web site Somatic Experiencing. "Trauma is treated in the body not the mind".

"Animals, though threatened routinely, are rarely traumatized because trauma is about the procedures the organism executes when exposed to overwhelming stress, threat and injury. In response to threat and injury, animals, including humans, execute biologically based, non-conscious action patterns that prepare them to meet the threat and defend themselves. Some animals freeze on the spot (opossum), while others flee (antelope), and still others will fight (bear). After the threat is over, the animal then releases this "survival" energy. We see this manifest in visible shaking and trembling. Once the animal has recovered its balance, it can resume its normal functioning. As one wildlife biologist noted, if an animal does not complete the process, it will not survive. It will die. Trauma is a highly activated incomplete biological response to threat, frozen in time. Trauma is physiological".

I was intrigued, my knowledge and experience of Indigenous ceremony and traditions resonated with Levine's work. During this time I was invited to witness my first "Mask Dance" at one of the "Big Houses" here on Vancouver Island. The Mask dance and Big House are sacred ceremonies; I am not at liberty to give information other than naming them. While witnessing the dance I practiced "tracking the sensations" in my body. I sat and watched the dancers move in a circle while drummers drummed on the side. I examined every detail of what they were wearing, what they were holding and what their movements were as they moved continuously in a circle. I watched as they went around,

² The theory postulates that the symptoms of trauma are the effect of a dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system (ANS). It further postulates that the ANS has an inherent capacity to self-regulate that is undermined by trauma, and that the inherent capacity to self-regulate can be restored by the procedures of Somatic Experiencing.

and around, and around, and around with the drumming steady, rhythmic, the shells held in their hands rattled in time to the drums continuous, it seemed to go on for a very long time. I noticed how eventually the sensation within my body became a steady gentle pulse in time to the drums. I sat noticing this sensation allowing it to fill me, as I was fully absorbed into the energy deep within my being, dream like. Then suddenly the drummers began to drum vigorously, the dancers feet moved faster as they moved around, the shells rattled louder I felt as though I had been startled awake though I was not sleeping. I noticed what seemed to be a shift in the energy state within me, it was like diving into cool water and coming awake, I felt alive, energized, my head and chest felt clear, it was an amazing experience as I sat there with the sensation of tingling all over. With this experience and the knowledge I was gaining about the theories of somatic processing and energy work I immediately wondered if this was partly how my Indigenous ancestors healed the impacts of trauma and other life events. I was so excited!

After ceremony you feel good like after a bath there is a good feeling you feel clean and light (Aunty Doll, 2014).

I began to research within the community of Indigenous scholars and writers for information about energy, ceremony and healing. This is where I discovered Cajete (2000) who postulates that a native science exists though there is no word for science in any Native language. In his book Native Science Cajete states, “Native Science is a metaphor for a wide range of tribal processes of perceiving, thinking, acting and “coming to know” that have evolved through human experience with the natural world” (p.2). He goes on to say that as human beings we must become open to the roles of sensation, perception, imagination, emotion, symbols and spirit as well as that of the concept of logic and rational empiricism. In other words, connection, Indigenous people see

themselves as connected to all things in creation. Rupert Ross quotes Jennie Leaning Cloud a Lakota woman from the Rosebud reservation in North Dakota, “We Indians think of the earth and the whole universe as a never-ending circle and in this circle man is just another animal. The buffalo and coyote are our brothers the birds our cousins. Even the tiniest ant, even a louse, even the smallest flower you can find, they are all relatives, We end our prayers with the words *mitakuyo oyasin* “all my relations” and that includes everything that grows, crawls, runs, creeps, hops and flies on this continent, White people see man as nature’s master and conqueror, but Indians, who are close to nature, know better (American Indian Myths and Legends, 1984).

The people from my territory, the Syilx (Okanagan), believe that:

We, the Syilx People, feel a deep connection with our land with our relatives, the animals and the trees: the rocks and all living things that share the environment. Our native nsyilxcan language grew out of our relationship with the land and the natural resources that surround us. Our traditional stories reflect this deep connection and help to pass cultural, spiritual and historical knowledge down through the generations (That Which Gives Us Life, ONA, 2013).

Disconnection from ceremony, our spirit and ourselves is one of the reasons why we are struggling with the skills to cope with the traumatic experiences that have become a way of life for many of us. We have lost the ability to return to a place of balance. Our ancestors used ceremony; it was a part of their daily lives. Cajete defines ceremony as follows; “Ceremony is both a context for transferring knowledge and a way to remember the responsibility we have to our relationships with life. Native ceremony is associated with maintaining and restoring balance, renewal, cultivating relationships and creative participation with nature” (p.70-71).

My personal premise is that one of the methods of care that may have been used

before contact by the Indigenous people of this land is ceremony. Through this research I explored some of the ceremonies that were used in the past and have been passed down by Indigenous ancestors as sources for ongoing health and the renewal of well-being. Experiences of trauma would have been a fact of life with the dangers inherent in living and surviving in the natural world. In this research I have used an Indigenous methodology using a storytelling / conversational method to explore traditional ways of coping with traumatic experiences. I am investigating whether these traditional methods can be revitalized and used for the purpose of addressing the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of Indigenous peoples.

An issue that is of great concern for me that has impacted my life and my journey is the lack of health and wellness for and within Indigenous peoples and our communities across Canada. Today, 2014, it is well studied and documented that Indigenous people are over-represented in health statistics over non-Indigenous people. There are many reasons for these facts uppermost are the results of the continued lived reality of colonization, assimilation, racism and the government's genocidal policies that have been perpetrated against the people from the time of contact and one of the most damages to health and well being includes the implementation of residential schools. The effects of this today according to the British Columbia Provincial Health Officer's report (2012), compared to non-Aboriginal people are such that they live seven years less, diabetes is triple, Aids / HIV deaths are double, alcohol and drug related deaths are 7 to 9 times higher, psychiatric care and hospital care is 4 times higher, more than half of Canadian prisoners are Indigenous, more than half of children in foster care are Indigenous and the list goes on and repeats in every province across Canada.

Upon contact, the people's lives changed dramatically, massive loss of lives due to disease brought by the colonizers devastated the people and their ways. Interruption of their 'system of care' would have left the people without the collective support to cleanse and renew their spirits. The continuous sharing of ceremony, honoring the land and their connection to all of creation would have allowed the ancestors to 'survive' and cope with the traumatic experiences of life before contact. Contact with European peoples was a completely new 'predator' that was a threat to our very existence.

The settler colonizers did what they could to take all of the land and destroy Indigenous lives in order to create economic expansions within vast territories. When they realized that Indigenous people were not going away they created many laws and policies within what is called the *Indian Act*. Under the *Indian Act* of 1867 our ancestors were herded onto tracks of land, legislation was created to control the lives of the people right down to who would be considered 'Indian' under their laws. With the power to acknowledge who was and was not an Indian they put together a plan to remove federal Indian status based in certain policy rules that impacted Indigenous woman or those native people who left reserves. In the development of status and reserve systems, the Indian act law removed any form of traditional leadership and governance along with our gatherings such as potlatching, feasting, sundance, sweatlodge, long houses all of which are connected to where our identities originate from. If a status Indian woman married a non-status man, she and her children would lose their status. While the overarching intent of the *Indian Act* was to take the land, the Colonizing settlers realized that their policies were not effective in isolating native people to reserves, our ancestors fought to protect the "Mother" our land. Settlers and their government began to look at ways to weaken

our ancestors further and to do this they had to look at what made our ancestors strong. They could see our connection to the land was reinforced within our ceremony and within our connection to each other and our children. Episkenew (2009) states, “the fact that policy makers fought to eradicate Indigenous knowledge and beliefs by eliminating Indigenous languages and stories suggest that they understood their power” (p.8). Hence colonizing settlers continued to develop policy to weaken and break the strengths of Indigenous peoples. Episkenew (2009) terms these policies under the *Indian Act* ‘Policies of Devastation’ where in 1884 a policy was legislated under the *Indian Act* known as Section 141 the “Pot Latch Law”. Under that law, many Indigenous people were imprisoned for continuing to practice ceremonies, it was also illegal for our people to use and keep their traditional regalia. In the third section of the Indian Act, signed on April 19, 1884, it was declared that:

Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the “Potlatch” or in the Indian dance known as the “Tamanawas” is guilty of a misdemeanor, and liable to imprisonment for a term of not more than six nor less than two months in any gaol or other place of confinement; and every Indian or persons who encourages... an Indian to get up such a festival... shall be liable to the same punishment.

As a result, many of our ancestors engaged in traditional ceremonies in secret, which has resulted in a loss of connection to traditional ways, and ceremony for many of us. Colonizing settlers recognized the strength we held in our collective Kinship systems where everything we did was with the thought of the next seven generations. The children were the strength of our communities; Elders taught that everyone had a place within the collective community. As stated, “In the time of the Old Ones” (Nyman, 2013) the Syilx people believe we are from the land, we have been on this land since the beginning of humans living here; the teachings of our natural laws have been passed

down orally through stories from one generation to the next. According to the writers in “Who we are – Syilx laws and evolution” (2004-08), our Elders have told us that, “understanding the living land and teaching our young generations how to become a 'part of it' is the only way we, the Syilx, have survived.”

We have been taught that in the time of our old ones, before contact, every individual within our community had a role and held a place of importance; we each had a job to do that would contribute to the overall well being of everyone. In the book *We Get Our Living Like Milk From The Land* (2000) Derickson, Maracle & Young-Ing write about my people the Syilx of what is now called the Okanagan. They talk about the fact that throughout Syilx Territory the care and wellbeing of the whole community was paramount to our leaders, and that this required incredible organization and skills. Our old people knew that if someone was lost then their role would need to be filled, so others would be taught and then given the roles that were now empty, we understood the importance of being ready to fill those roles. Babies were cared for up to the age of three by the mothers of one or two families in the community, this was their role. There was no need for baby sitters, day care or for the moms to become overwhelmed with their many tasks. This whole family of baby care people would work together to provide food, diaper changes and all that goes into the care of the babies. Grandparents watched over the other children up to about age eleven / twelve; they heard the stories, learned the songs, dances, medicines, fishing, basket weaving, tanning, sewing, hunting, etc. and learned all that was required to become healthy and skilled community members. Young adults stayed with the aunts and uncles and learned how to perform their ‘specialized’ tasks so that they could take on the role they would have in the community when it was time.

Training started off with what was manageable for their age and gradually got more complex and harder as the child grew and learned. Never did our people use a heavy hand in teaching the children, in this way they were eager to learn and take on more, they would build on each task they became good at. Children could not fail, they learned through success, this was encouragement to become good at all things with no fear of failure later.

Each child grew up learning about their importance to the community and their responsibility to their teachers and the other people within their community. They would learn this too from the teacher mentors that guided them into the ways of communal life. Another of the Syilx laws is that we are each responsible to everyone else in the community, each of us are a healthy part of the 'whole' family. The adults had the responsibility to model and teach from the earliest age that our actions are always connected to the others within the community. In this way we learned that we needed to think about what impact everything we did had on our people, it was not OK to hurt any member of our community. Our love, health and wellbeing was tied to each other, we knew this with every fiber of our being before we became an adult. We understood our connection to our family and extended family, our community, the whole nation and our land which included every living thing on it. This too was the law of the Syilx people.

According to our oral history we did not have orphans because the whole family accepted the role of teaching, loving and providing for every child. That way every child / person grew up knowing that they had the right to family, teachings, security and love, no one was left out! Including those not yet born! It was known that all Syilx people were important and must be cared for. One of our most outstanding laws is to learn to live and work in harmony with everyone, to share with the community. The story of turtle, 'Cepcaptik,' teaches us to think of everyone not just ourselves as in a collective, To have more than others is to have power and

control over them, the teaching is that, it is not OK to have more while others go without in the family or community. People stay strong together, when there is plenty we all share it and enjoy it, the same goes with hardship, and we face it as one. One heart, one mind! We are connected with everything in creation and to each other; we are all a part of the circle. For our community's health and well-being we must keep the circle balanced. It is my understanding that these teachings are very similar across many of our Indigenous Nations; we are all a part of the circle. Colonization and the impacts of the Residential School have all but destroyed us.

In his article *Aboriginal People and Education* published in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* Harvey McCue (2013) states, "Traditional education among most Indigenous groups was accomplished using several techniques including observation and practice, family and group socialization, oral teachings, and participation in community ceremonies and institutions. With these methods children learned the values, skills and knowledge considered necessary for adult life". A strategic plan by the state was developed to dismantle our way of passing knowledge to the children by removing them and putting them in Church run schools in order to assimilate them into a western mainstream way of living or more appropriately to "kill the Indian" in each and every child. In 1863 the first Residential school was opened in Mission B.C. and this school was also the last to close in B.C. in 1984. In 1920 the *Indian Act* was amended to make it law for Indigenous parents to send their kids age seven to fifteen to Residential school and if parents did not abide to this law, once again their lives were under threat of prison. Prison threats were termed the governments' aggressive policy to assimilate Indigenous people. It is now known that the experiences of multi generations of Indigenous children in these schools across this country was nothing less than a form of internment or jail,

clearly the children were being kept as hostages to force control over the parents and communities as a whole (Episkenew, p. 21-68). I have heard that in some villages there were no children left! Can you imagine a community with no children? As stated earlier Indigenous people lived their lives geared toward the next seven generations, without the children it would have been hard to maintain a vision of the future and you can see this in our lives today. The truth of what happened within the Residential schools is now common knowledge; a picture of just how severe and long-term the impacts of the residential school system is emerging. Based on her experience as one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners of Canada, Dr. Marie Wilson states, "High rates of addiction and mental health issues are commonplace in Aboriginal communities, the epidemic of suicide in many regions is an urgent and national crisis" (Rabble News, December 6, 2012). She has little doubt these issues are related directly to "the continuing trauma of having separated children from parents." These traumas reverberate through generations. The effects of having been raised outside of the home, without loving parents and often under brutal conditions, have left deep and lasting impacts on the parenting capacity of many survivors. In my role as a Resolution Health Support Worker I have heard many survivors state in their own words "the thing I have greatest regrets about is the way in which I raised my own children". The high incidence of youth suicide rates in Indigenous communities is an example of how devastating the loss of our identity and our connection to our ancestral values of raising our children as precious gifts is.

The old ones were the wisdom, the knowledge and honesty (truth). Everyone knew their function in the community each person had their role; everyone had a place of importance (Victor Underwood, 2014).

My life has been directly impacted by the policies of the settler colonizers in this land now called Canada. My great grandmother was taken from her family and put into the residential school in Mission B.C. Like many other Indian women of that time she developed a strategy of resistance to prevent her children from experiencing the same fate, if she married a man from off of the reserve she would not have to surrender her children. She married my great grandfather who did not have to live on reserve because he was half French, he is identified in the Canada census as “French Breed”. She was able to move off reserve and did not have to surrender her children to the Indian Agent and Residential school. However, the children who came later were disconnected and were moved further and further away from knowing and being who they are as Indigenous people. These young people were unwelcome in both worlds as a result of her action to protect her children and move away from the reserve, she also lost her status as an Indian, which in turn did not allow her to return to her place and birthright. Alcoholism, violence and sexual predator-ism took over her children’s ways of being in the world. Rather than sacred teachings and traditional practices, the way of violence began to be passed down generation to generation.

As a child lost in the system of the 60’s scoop I ran away and ended up on the streets of Vancouver at the age of fifteen; I gravitated toward many unhealthy situations that brought me to a turning point and I found the path of my ancestors and began to heal. My great Aunty Doll likes to say, “Aw...Shee-ill-aaa...you finally remembered who you are” (Aunty Doll, 1994). The dis-connection that happened is a direct result of the impact of the policies under the Indian Act that have almost destroyed my family along with many other Indigenous families and communities across this land. One of the questions I asked

myself when I began my 'journey of healing' was, "what happened in my family that causes all of this dysfunction and trauma?" Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) said it very well when she said, "Today, multiple generations of Indigenous people live with intergenerational post-traumatic stress disorder, which is the direct result of multiple generations of colonial policies all focused on dealing with the "Indian problem" (p.9).

Chapter 2

The Approach

My professional, educational and life experiences have motivated me to want to explore Indigenous people's experience of traditional ceremony and healing as a method to cope with trauma. I began by reviewing literature about traditional ceremony, healing and insight into "spirit / energy" that was written by Indigenous Scholars. When I think about healing trauma and the efforts that people are making today to heal, along with the options available to them, I recognized that it is important to include mainstream modalities of healing trauma that resemble traditional healing. I have looked at the work of neurophysiology and trauma therapy and have drawn into my literature review references of western therapies involving "Energy Work" for healing trauma. I will also include material written by an Indigenous Scholar with a PhD in Counselling Psychology who has specialized in working with Mental Health and Addictions. Dr. Rod McCormick's work and writing is valuable to my thesis work for setting the context of the results of trauma unhealed. The connection between traumas, mental health and unhealthy coping such as addiction is well documented in western terms but not in spiritual and cultural terms as his work demonstrates. McCormick states, "Disconnection from cultural values and traditions have led to a painful and meaningless existence for many Aboriginal people who have turned to drugs and alcohol in an unsuccessful attempt to deal with their anxiety and pain. The discovery of meaning and the resultant healing for Aboriginal clients is being enabled through substance abuse treatment strategies that facilitate reconnection to cultural values and traditions" (2000, p.25).

While interviewing Gerry Ambers, one of the Knowledge Keepers, as a part of my

research I learned of another piece of literature written from the stories of her mother's great Aunt Agnes Alfred (Qwiqwasutinuxw), a noble woman from Alert Bay, British Columbia. Gerry referred to her as, "Granny Axuw" she gave credit to her for gaining some of her knowledge. In particular, the wisdom her people gained from what the animals taught humans. I bring this literature into my review as a link to Stories of Indigenous Elders referencing the animal world as their teachers just as the now renowned Peter Levine does in his discovery of Somatic Energy Work and his theory of energy locked in the body due to traumatic experiences as evidenced in his study of animals. The book *Paddling to where I Stand* (2004) is a written account of a renowned Knowledge Keeper's oral account of her memories and knowledge translated from her language by her granddaughter. A similar piece of writing entitled *Nature Power in the spirit of an Okanagan Story Teller* (2004), also written from the oral memories and knowledge as told by an Elder Story Teller and Knowledge Keeper. Both of these pieces of literature are accounts of experiences as told by two Elders who still have their language. One of them is from my territory in the Okanagan, Harry Robinson, and one is Agnes Alfred from Alert Bay. While their stories were not written for the purpose of the subject of my thesis I have recognized the benefit of what the stories tell me. They are rich and informative of the innate knowledge of Indigenous people of the realm of the supernatural and metaphysical world that we are closely and naturally connected with. I recommend that you the reader take the time to locate these invaluable writings of knowledge and wisdom, read and you will discover so much more than an account of two individuals lives. Without the authors who took the time to record and write the stories of these Indigenous Elders down the teachings would have been lost when they both went to

the other side. For this I hold my hands up saying lim ‘limpt (thank you) I honor you for your work.

The animals are our teachers....there was a time when humans and animals understood and talked with each other.they taught us how to live (Gerry Ambers, 2014).

Literature Review

A modern western approach to explaining how trauma impacts nervous system regulation is known as *Polyvagal Theory*, developed by Stephen Porges (2011). His work, *The Polyvagal Theory; Neurophysiological Foundation of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, Self-Regulation* is the result of four decades of research into the neural regulation of the autonomic nervous system and is acknowledged as a work in progress. Porges reveals new insight into the biological substrates of safety and danger, as experienced in the autonomic nervous system. He describes three distinct physiological states that articulate how we unconsciously evaluate safety and danger in our environment. One aspect of these states is our “social engagement system” which enables the felt sense of connection, trust and the ability to receive support from those around us. Porges gives an understanding of what is happening in the body and brain when there has been a disruption of the operation of natural functioning due to traumatic experiences. Porges focuses on human biology, using the term neuroception to describe the unconscious process whereby we detect safety, danger or life threat in our environment; his polyvagal theory outlines the biological mechanisms that inhibit defensive responses such as fight or flight and which, therefore enable social connection. He emphasizes that responses to threat are reflected in distinct levels of survival strategies. By instinct, humans are wired to, firstly, make attempts at social connection. If help can’t be accessed

in this way, the second survival strategies come online - we move to fight our aggressor or to flee. The third survival strategy comes online if we are unable to protect ourselves; this mechanism is to freeze or to collapse. All of these strategies are based in intricate neurological and chemical responses in the brain, which either inhibit or facilitate particular behaviors. It is the energy of a thwarted response, coupled with fear at the time of the threat that results in ongoing nervous system dysregulation. Understanding polyvagal theory can help humans to regulate their nervous systems back into a comfortable state for living in the world. When we look through the lens of interpersonal neurobiology we appreciate that the treatment of anxiety, depression, trauma and other mental health conditions can be responded to in ways that are more effective than cognitive behavioral and talk therapies.

Polyvagal theory informs the work, in part, of Peter Levine (2010) whose ideas I will use to inform the foundation of my understanding of somatic motor responses and energy work. I believe I need some understanding of neurophysiology to help with my analysis of what is happening during the experiences of ceremony and traditional healing rituals. This knowledge helps to deepen my understanding of what may be happening for those of us who practice ceremony and traditional healing for the treatment of trauma issues. My intent in making this connection is to communicate that perhaps our ancestors knew what western science is just beginning to accept as truth and therefore our traditional / ceremonial methods of healing are more valuable than the accepted and available western approaches, it is because of their loss that we remain disconnected from our spirit strength / healing.

Our ancestors knew, they were doing this work long before others came here we are masters at energy work, we can see how energy moves” (Gerry Ambers, 2014).

Peter Levine PhD, developer of a modality of somatic psychotherapy called “Somatic Experiencing”, in his book, *In An Unspoken Voice. How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness (2010)* he brings together what has been discovered in the realm of trauma treatment and somatic therapy over many years. Through his study and observations of animals and their instinctual ability to re-regulate their nervous system after traumatic experiences, he has compiled a wealth of knowledge about the release of these unprocessed, survival energies. Levine recognizes that the energy of survival energy gets locked in the body and manifests in a host of symptoms including post traumatic stress, where the body / mind can continue to try to re-enact the sequence in an effort to attain energy release. He talks about helping people to learn to listen to the ‘unspoken voice’ of their own bodies and to feel their “survival emotions” without being overwhelmed by the power of these natural high-energy states. Integrating the theory of Porges (2011) on the neurophysiology of our polyvagal system Levine recognizes that when we are traumatized our nervous system is in a highly aroused / chaotic or disconnected energy state. According to Porges, experiencing events where someone feels unsafe and is unable to protect themselves or to be protected causes an incredible amount of energy to mobilize. When the arousal of this energy is such that it becomes too much for our system to process, our organism’s way of preserving itself is for our metabolism to shut down so that we no longer are using oxygen. This action causes the energy to be pushed down; the trapped and suppressed energy is what causes uncomfortable and/or painful symptoms within our bodies and states of confusion; feeling overwhelmed and unregulated emotion in our body/minds. Fragments of sensory memory are what is held back and is what needs to be released in a gradual way in order

for us to re-integrate our life energy back. As well, Levine proposes we need to complete the thwarted defense response. It takes a lot of energy to hold the “fragmented energies down”. We can’t really ‘live’ our lives fully because of expending so much energy to dampen survival energies. I think this is what leads to depression and anxiety, numerous medical health ailments, including diabetes, addiction and explosions of rage amongst other problems for people who have undigested experiences of trauma (Levine, 2010).

Levine and other practitioners who do trauma work through the lens of interpersonal neurobiology caution that the survival energy needs to be released gradually and in a context where there is relational safety. Unfortunately many do not understand this. The constant retelling of the traumatic experience so popular with mainstream therapists brought in to work with our people just succeed in reactivating the sensations at the time of the original traumas. As such people can feel more disconnected, chaotic or overwhelmed when a story has been told.

Peter Levine’s work fits with my theory that before contact Indigenous ancestors understood the nature of trauma and used ceremonial methods to release /to re-regulate and to co-regulate their nervous systems. *In An Unspoken Voice (2010)* Levine speaks about the spiritual component of who we are as human beings. He brings in the topic of Indigenous people and their healing practices along with their wisdom and connection with the animal world. Learning about tracking my body sensations following my introduction to the work of Levine in my Trauma Work course and practicing it while observing Indigenous ceremony has brought me to ask the question about traditional models of health and wellness used by the people in pre-contact times.

F. David Peat (2005) is a non-native theoretical physicist who earned his PhD in England; he was indoctrinated into mainstream science and thought until his worldview was challenged when he experienced a Blackfoot Sun Dance ceremony. *Blackfoot Physics: A journey into the Native American Universe (2005)* is an account of his experiences and changing perspective about Indigenous knowledge and western science. He writes a fascinating account of the intersecting of anthropology, history, metaphysics, cosmology, quantum theory and ancient Indigenous knowledge and practices. He brings together two worlds Western and Indigenous from the perspective of a western scientist. He describes his experience in such a way that an incredible resemblance between Indigenous teachings and some of the insights that are emerging from modern science are revealed.

What interests me in bringing his work into my research is his explanation of a “different worldview” he states, “Within the chapters of this book can be found discussions of metaphysics and philosophy; the nature of space and time; the connection between language, thought, and perception; mathematics and its relationship to time; the ultimate nature of reality; causality and interconnection; astronomy and the movements of time; healing; the inner nature of animals, maintaining a balanced exchange of energy; of agriculture; of genetics; of considerations of ecology; of the connection of the human being to the cosmos; and of the nature of processes of knowing (p.78).” This excites me because he has articulated some of the connections that I sense between ceremony and energy. His work is respectful and he honors Indigenous knowledge keepers throughout this work including Leroy Little Bear, a well-respected Indigenous scholar from the University of Lethbridge as one of his guides.

Dr. Gregory Cajete is a Tewa Indian from Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico. As a native educator he pursued his PhD and wrote, *Science from a Native American Perspective 1986* as his dissertation, he also wrote and published *Native Science in 2000*. As the Director of Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico he now leads the way in bringing ancient knowledge to the academy. Cajete was ahead of his time when he first brought the idea forward that Indigenous knowledge is equal to scientific knowledge. This book explores the nature of Native Science as participation with the natural world. Cajete explains that, “to understand the foundations of Native Science one must become open to the roles of sensation, perception, imagination, emotion, symbols and spirit as well as that of concept, logic, and rational empiricism” (p.2). He explores the links of Indigenous knowledges with what western science has decided only they can know or that they know first. Cajete bravely brings forward the fact that indigenous people are connected to the earth, the animals and the cosmos. He is able to align and reconcile ancient beliefs and practices with modern mainstream science. This book has informed my research and thesis by providing academic substantiation and validation in the realm of Indigenous knowledges. Cajete explores extensively our connections to the earth and all of creation; he defines “spirit” as “energy” and our path to healing as re-connection.

McCormick’s (2000) journal article, *Let only the good spirits guide you*, explores the relevance of culture when it comes to Indigenous people healing from traumatic experiences, addictions and mental health. In his work he includes the historical reality of the impact of colonization on the Indigenous people of this land including the introduction of alcohol and its devastation to the ancestors’ ability to maintain their

spiritual connection to the land. McCormick acknowledges that the attempts of mainstream counseling and helping services remain ineffective. He states, “Attempts made by mainstream health service providers to assist Aboriginal people in recovering from alcohol and substance abuse has led to only minimal success. He argues that assistance measures taken by the majority culture to assist Aboriginal people have been, and continue to be, misguided and counterproductive. For various reasons, Aboriginal people tend not to use the services provided by the majority culture, and of those who do, approximately half drop out after the first session” (p.26). He further argues that as spiritual people we need to return to our connections with nature, our culture and each other to heal from the impact that this has had on us as a people. “The aim for healing of First Nations people, for example, is concerned with attaining and maintaining balance between the four dimensions of the person: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Western therapeutic approaches can be seen as imbalanced as they overemphasize one dimension of the person by focusing, for example, on feeling or on cognitive modification” (McCormick, 1994, p.28).

Paddling to Where I Stand, is a literary account of the memories and life of Agnes Alfred a Kwakwakawakw woman from Alert Bay B.C. Her traditional name is Qwiqwasutinuxw a noble woman, no one knows exactly when she was born because birth certificates were not used for most Indians born in the 1880’s. However according to Daisy Sewid – Smith (her grand daughter) within Grampa Moses records is stated that she was born on January 26, 1889 if she had lived to her next birthday she would have been 104 years old; she died in 1992. She spoke only her language and was a renowned Knowledge Keeper for her people sharing stories and first hand accounts of the early

days up until her death. She was actually jailed during the times of the Potlatch ban for participating in a potlatch. She recounts many stories of people transforming into people of the animal world and the lessons they learn while in their transformed state.

Interactions between the supernatural world and the natural world could be understood and accepted as metaphors or as real. No matter, what I can recognize that woven throughout the stories are similarities to healing practices in use today. For example in the chapter heading, Ceremonies and Rituals, she talks of a ceremony of purification after a death of a close loved one. She talks of how her mother would purify by, “going into the woods and bathing with fresh water for several days”. She talks of the dances that would take place for the purpose of healing; there were dances for healing and dances for many other purposes. Dances and songs for healing would not be utilized at the same time each had their own purpose (p. 132). While the experience while at the dances is not described by Granny Axuw, except for the description of some, reading about them brings to my mind the energy experience within my body while witnessing the Mask dance. Her stories and teachings are so profound that I can recognize how the people would have benefited by the daily practice of this way of life.

So I went out into the forest and connected to the Spirit, the Ancestors (Levi Martin, 2014).

In *Nature Power in the Spirit of an Okanagan Story Teller* Harry Robinson talks about the spiritual connection between the natural world and we humans. Three books emerged from the work of Wendy Wickwire over a period of ten years she recorded on a reel- to- reel tape recorder diverse stories as told by Elder Harry Story Teller. She has written them in the style that Harry talked for the most part. Again my reason for

including this work into my thesis is for the richness and matter of fact-ness of the teachings that emerge from the stories. Again I recommend that you, the readers, take the time to read and really listen to the stories as they land in your heart and in your being. I can recognize the weaving of teachings and information that can be integrated into possible explanations for lost understandings of “our way”. Harry speaks of people gaining their power to heal the sick after dancing and singing for a period of time at dances held in the winter, “they go to a dance and sing, on the third winter they sing for three, four days, three four night, and then the dance is finished, all over” (p. 135). He describes how following the third year of dances the dancer gains a power to heal people. Once again this demonstrates the importance of participation in our traditional ceremonies for the development of gifts or talents that lay dormant. Harry relays the story of a boy meeting his power animal when he is left in the woods by his uncle and father. He describes how the boy thinks he is going to put a stick under a tree stump to tease a chipmunk out and ends up meeting another boy. The other boy is the chipmunk, and tells him that the stump is his grandfather (p.37 – 40). Once again here is an account of lessons being taught to a human by an animal and a part of our natural environment. This fits completely with our spirituality as Indigenous people we are connected to everything all of creation. We must regain that connection in order to remember how to heal ourselves and how to allow the natural world to heal us.

Chapter 3

*“When you’re ahead of your time, you have to create your own path”
(Cajete, Gregory. 2008)*

Methodology

The methodology that I am using is Story Telling. Inspired by the work of Margaret Kovach (2009) and Robina Thomas (2006) I chose a qualitative and Indigenous methodology framework to investigate my research question. Kovach explains Indigenous research as the study of Indigenous knowledges as methodology (Kovach, 2009). In her book *Indigenous Methodologies* Kovach puts forward the idea that from an epistemology and ontology based on relationships an Indigenous methodology emerges that encompasses a relational and tribal knowledge worldview, this can be achieved by using a qualitative approach to gathering information (p.43). Indigenous values (axiology) are based on a relational accountability of what is more important and meaningful, which is to be accountable to ‘all our relations’ we believe we are connected to every living thing and all of creation on earth, we recognize this connection in all we do. In *Research as Resistance* (2005) Robina Thomas explains that, “traditionally, story telling played an essential role in nurturing and educating Indigenous children (p.237). Using Kovach’s epistemology of relations and connection (tribal knowledge) and Thomas’s story telling method of receiving teachings I believe respect will be honored with this framework.

As I compiled the results of my research it became clear that to understand the stories of the Knowledge Keepers I would need to translate from my perspective in order to get an answer to my research question. As I reviewed the literature and sought the answer it

became obvious that my lived experience and the knowledge I have gained had to become a part of this work. How could I understand and interpret what the Knowledge Keepers were telling me unless you the readers knew where my perspective came from. It seemed it would be honest for me to integrate my story into this paper. I questioned myself about this and wondered if my methodology of using Story Telling by gathering stories from Knowledge Keepers included using my own story. I investigated this and for a time thought that maybe I was using Auto-ethnography as well. I located work by an Indigenous scholar from New Zealand named Dr. Paul Witinui. In Witinui's work *Indigenous Auto-ethnography* (2010) he describes autoethnography as, Auto (self) Ethno (culture) Graphy (writing). He talks about exploring, engaging and experiencing self, as a Native method of inquiry. This resonated with what I quite naturally was doing as I delved further into my thesis topic. He states, "Traditional knowledge systems have been at the core of our existence as Indigenous people since time immemorial. As an oral/aural-based society, our ancestors frequently engaged in opportunities to not only test their knowledge at different times and in different situations but also to recall knowledge through the art of story-telling" (2013, page). What stands out for me here is amongst much of what he has to say is that our ancestors used stories to "recall knowledge" through the art of story-telling. I was able to get to the place where I realized that gathering the stories from the Knowledge Keepers and weaving my own story throughout is my Indigenous way of doing and coming to know, it is all a part of story - telling and a part of who I am as an Indigenous woman from this land.

As I moved through the process of writing this thesis paper I have written about myself, I have integrated my experiences at various points in my life into my writing in order that you the reader can understand where my perspective comes from. I have insider knowledge into Indigenous ceremony though my knowledge was gained later in my life and I wanted to show that in my writing. Situating the self in the search makes sense according to the writings of Absolon in Kaandossiwin (2011). She talks about the importance to many Indigenous researchers of personal connections in the work of research. She states that, “when we do research we are ultimately doing research about ourselves, families, communities, nations, histories, experiences, stories and culture. Our personal, familial, cultural, traditional and historical connections are evident in our searches (p.74).” And this is truly how it has felt and came to be for me.

This framework is necessary because it has been difficult for research to explore the nature of Indigenous healing for a variety of reasons one being the secret nature of Indigenous ceremonial practices. The very reason for the survival of the practice has been the secretiveness of the practitioners, as the actual ceremonies must not be revealed. This researcher has been initiated into ceremonial ways and I was able to approach the research in a ceremonial way using ceremonial protocols keeping secret the aspects that do not need to be revealed. Ethical considerations in favor of this framework and methodology are the respect for ceremony and ancient teachings that forms the foundation and approach for the work.

The Method

Using Story-telling fits with the interpretive nature of this qualitative research and Indigenous ontology. According to Brown and Strega (2005), “understanding the reality

of an experience or process or phenomenon is contextual and must be grounded in the experience of those who have had the experience or process or phenomenon. Rich, “thick” description brings a deeper, more complex understanding” (p.206). The intent of this research is to find out how traditional Indigenous ceremony and healing feels for Indigenous people who have experienced trauma. The rationale for this method is that by listening to the ‘stories’ of how the participants experience ceremony to deal with trauma I believe an understanding of the potential for a model of healing is revealed. This method fits the population because Indigenous people by nature are ‘oral’ people. For thousands and thousands of years we have passed knowledge from generation to generation through story telling. I chose the method of story-telling because I believe it offers respect and honor to the participant’s experiences. In conversation it is considered inappropriate to ask such intimate questions of their experience as story-telling allows participants to share what they want of their experience in the way they want.

Gathering the Information

The method of gathering the information (data collection) was achieved through recording the story telling that took place during conversations with Knowledge Keepers. I applied for and received authorization from the “Research Ethics Board” at the University of Victoria. At the time of our meetings with my personal and verbal explanation I also provided the explanation in writing.³ I provided each participant with a written consent form to sign if they were willing as well.⁴ The four participants were asked to respond to six semi-structured questions that I believed would answer the

³ See Appendix 1.

⁴ See Appendix 3.

question, “Can Indigenous Ceremony and Traditions heal the negative impacts of traumatic experiences?” They were each provided with a copy of the questions in writing before our meeting and at the time of the meeting as well.⁵ The UVIC Research Ethics Board brought my attention to the fact that I was interviewing individuals from separate tribal nations and therefore they were a part of a community.

I will refer to the participants or people who told their stories as “Knowledge Keepers” and “Traditional Healer” or “Elder” and sometimes “participant” interchangeably because that is who they are and what they do. They have the gifts of holding Indigenous knowledge therefore they can be viewed as one of our knowledge sources. The research question is linked with ceremony; this was accomplished by integrating the protocols of the individual Knowledge Keepers right from the beginning of the interview. In keeping with my Indigenous methodological approach and using a personal research protocol I spoke personally to each of the Knowledge Keepers. Given our relationships it would have been offensive for me to send a third party to make the request for their participation. I asked each of the Elders for direction of the protocol within their respective communities for me to sit with them and gather the stories. I specifically asked if I should consult with their Chief and Counsel for permission. Each of my participants reacted to this question with surprise and stated that they had the right to talk without seeking permission from anyone. One of the Elders in particular stated that their chief and counsel did not respect or believe in traditional ways, he did not want me to talk to them. Another of the Knowledge Keepers stated that she had permission to share her medicines as she saw fit and was given the gift and right or license if you will

⁵ See Appendix 2.

to practice traditional healing. So all of the participants in this study represent and have ownership of their own experience and knowledge. I will repeat here as well that I will not be describing ceremony or traditional healing practice details in this thesis.

At the time of their agreement to participate I asked for direction of the protocols they wished me to follow. I honor and respect these participants they are Knowledge Keepers, Elders, Traditional Healers, Community members and my Teachers, for this reason I first spoke to them about what I was doing and how I was doing it. I asked for their guidance and their opinions of how I should proceed and followed their directions.

To ensure their comfort I went to the Elders homes with offerings of traditional medicines, food, tobacco, olligan grease and home- made berry jam. The information I sought is how the participants feel when practicing ceremony and if there is any effect on their well-being emotionally, physically, mentally or spiritually. I firmly believe that the results of this research study has the potential to contribute to the development of effective Indigenous healing strategies for clinical approaches in social work from a decolonization framework.

Participants

I invited three individuals and one married couple who are Indigenous people and who have experience with traditional ceremony as well as knowledge of the impacts of traumatic experiences to engage in story telling conversations / interviews with me as the researcher. When I first began to conceive my approach to collecting data I wondered how I would know the knowledge keepers to ask and where they should come from. I knew instinctively that I needed to follow a spiritual way or a way that honored our Indigenous knowledge. Keeping with a sacred way I would honor our sacred number

four. It is my teachings that “four” is a sacred number, a number of connection and of balance. On this Earth plane we have four elements Air, Water, Earth and Fire; four directions North, South, East and West; four Nations represented by four colors Black, White, Red and Yellow; and the list goes on everything is done in combinations of four. Because I am located on Vancouver Island I intuitively knew I needed to respect the ancestors of all three tribal nations here; the Coast Salish, Nuuchahnulth and Kwakwaka'wakw. For this reason I gathered stories from people who had ancestral ties to the Island Nations. I also bring energy and knowledge from my territorial lands it made sense to interview someone from my nation the Syilx (Okanagan) Nation as well. There was no one better to interview than the matriarch of my family great-Aunty Doll, who is ninety-six years old. She is the daughter of my great grandmother who was a well-known “Traditional Healer” in the Okanogan Territories. While many of the ancient ways have been lost to many in our family, Aunty Doll remembers, she is our record keeper. The other participants are people who I know from the Traditional Healers / Knowledge Keepers community here on Vancouver Island. I have shared ceremony with them and received teachings from them while assisting them in ceremony. Each is well respected and renowned for their healing work, wisdom and teachings that they carry. During my time working with them at community healing gatherings I have discussed with them what it is that I am doing and where my interest is, they have been very supportive and encouraging of my interest to get our traditional healing recognized and better utilized. Most of my work with them has taken place during events organized as a part of the Indian Residential School Settlement processes.

The Traditional Healers / participants were informed about the nature of the research

and asked to respond to the question of “how they ‘feel’ ceremony in relation to the effects of trauma” or “how the trauma they have experienced feels after engaging in ceremony.” I investigated and informed myself of the protocols for each of their respective Nations and followed their direction.

Data collection was achieved as I sat and listened deeply to the stories of the experiences and wisdom that the Knowledge Keepers shared with me. I was taught the skills of deep listening while sitting with Elders, I was instructed to clear my mind and listen with my heart while sitting on the mountains in my Spirit Quest fasting. In

Blackfoot Physics (2002), Peat states,

“Out of the power of silence great oratory is born. When Native people speak they are not talking from the head, relating some theory, mentioning what they read in a book, or what someone else has told them. Rather, they speak from the heart, from the traditions of their people, and from the knowledge of their land; they speak of what they have seen and heard and touched, and of what has been passed on to them from the traditions of their people. It is their inner silence that allows them to listen to the prompting of their hearts and to the subtle resonances that lie within each word of a language and which, when uttered, reverberate throughout the world (p.75).”

With signed permission of the Traditional Healers the sessions were audiotaped. With signed permission they all authorized the use of their names in this document as well. I explained that I needed the recordings so I can listen again later rather than trying to remember everything said in the moment. By paying attention in an open, perceptive and interpretive way to the stories as they were told and then later as I played them back facilitated the analysis of the Knowledge Keepers experience of trauma and ceremonial healing. I listened for repeated themes and documented them into my results.

The questions were:

1. What do you know of ceremony of the ancients before contact?

2. Have you practiced Traditional Ceremony?
3. What happens in your body, mind, spirit and emotions when you practice ceremony?
4. When did you first learn of Traditional Ceremony?
5. What sorts of trauma have you experienced in your life?
6. Have you used Ceremony for your traumatic experiences?

With every session I maintained fluidity with the questions by presenting them before the meeting and allowing the participants in each session to speak to what felt right for them. I listened and asked questions when they finished speaking if I needed to know more about something they said. I am not including details about ceremony, personal experiences, spiritual or sacred teachings that were revealed during these interviews. I am writing only enough for the reader to understand the nature of what is said and how it connects to the experience of ceremony and healing.

Chapter 4

The Analysis

My approach to analyzing the data or themes that emerged from the stories gathered had a 'meaning making' quality to it. I employed a thematic process by grouping common things that were said in response to the questions, I looked for themes that were repeated throughout the stories. I listened to the taped interviews and transcribed the responses. I then printed the pages and read through highlighting the common themes with different coloured highlighting pens. The repeated themes were marked together and the most common themes grouped and connected into a common understanding. The Knowledge Keepers responses to each question have been laid out individually after the questions. Under the Knowledge Keepers section I have provided an introduction to the Elders with basic information about each of them.

The Perspective

My perspective is based on my life experiences in other words my story. As I stated earlier in the beginning of my journey of healing I was drawn to and found the path toward the traditional spiritual ceremonies of my ancestors. Instinctively I was drawn to a healing circle for woman known as "Indian Homemakers" in Vancouver B.C. My first circle was the most powerful experience I had ever had since that date. I was shy and scared when I came into the room, fearful of rejection (I developed this fear as a foster child). I remember how cozy it felt sitting there in the circle with other women. I felt like a little girl again back home with my aunties. An abalone shell with dried sage was lit and we all stood in the circle while an eagle feather was passed over the outside of our bodies

moving the smoke back and forth. It was explained to us that we were cleansing the negative energies from the energy field around our body that is picked up as we move through the world. I had never been smudged before and remember feeling such a calm come over me, the smell of the sage brought back an overwhelming flood of memory. I could feel myself in the room where I visited my great grandmother Julia when I was a small girl. I was in the Okanagan in the old house on the land where our family graveyard is. I could feel her so close to me in that moment and heard the sound of her voice within me, though I did not understand what she was saying. Up until now, I actually have never been sure if I heard or felt her voice. The eagle feather was passed from woman to woman around the circle. Each woman said her name and talked about herself and what was going on for her. I had experience talking within a group because I was involved in woman's self help meetings at the same time. I was used to saying, 'hi my name is Sheila.' So I was surprised when I said my name with the eagle feather in my hand and my chest felt like it broke open and the tears came flooding out uncontrollably. My chest and throat felt like they were going to explode, it was like a dam breaking open.

It was then that I seemed to know things about my great Grandmother that I did not know before. I was young when I last saw her; she died before I ran from the foster homes. Because of this experience I was motivated to get in contact with my great Auntie Doll, and when I did contact her, she looked at me with such a knowing look in her eye nodding her head, "Aw...Shee...il...laaaa...you finally remembered who you are" (Aunty Doll, 1994) this was the time I first heard those words. They will always stand out for me, I am sure if you have ever received those kinds of teachings from an Elder you will agree they are so simple, direct and clearly matter-of-fact. Auntie Doll was

able to confirm for me that my great grandmother was in Residential school and in fact she was in the Mission Residential School, the first to open in BC. I was told how my grandmother and another young girl ran on foot and walked from Mission as far as they could to get toward the Okanogan when they were barely fifteen. There must have been a reason for two young girls to endeavor to make such a journey on foot through the mountains. The truth of the atrocities experienced at the residential schools is now being made public; I think I can safely assume that my grandmother may have shared a similar story. I was told of the medicine and support my great-grandmother gave to people, she was a healer who was well known throughout the Okanagan territory.

The experience of memory from my grandmother that I spoke about having in the healing circle was named when I was participating in an Indigenous Women's Studies course at Vancouver Island University. In the book *A Recognition of Being* Kim Anderson (2005) shares what she has learned from Sylvia Maracle who explains that many Native cultures teach that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our physical being. As such, we are immediately connected to those who have gone before us (p.25). Learning this provided a huge validation for me about the importance to continue learning and practicing traditional ceremonies. Since then I have come to know that the more I practice and learn traditional ceremonies deeply held memories and knowledge becomes clear and enters my awareness.

The Europeans took our land, our lives, and our children like the winter snow takes the grass. The loss is painful but the seed lives in spite of the snow. In the fall of the year, the grass dies and drops its seed to lie hidden under the snow. Perhaps the snow thinks the seed has vanished, but it lives on hidden, or blowing in the wind, or clinging to the plants leg of progress. How does the acorn unfold into an oak? Deep inside itself it knows-and we are not different, we know deep inside ourselves the pattern of life. – Eber Hampton

The Knowledge Keepers

Victor and Joyce Underwood are Coast Salish people from the Tsawout First Nation of Saanich British Columbia. They have been married for over 50 years; I interviewed them together and have combined their responses. Aunty Doll is a Syilx woman from the Lower Similkameen in the Okanogan Valley of British Columbia (B.C.). Gerry Ambers is a Kwakwaka'wakw woman from the Numgis First Nation in Alert Bay B.C. Levi Martin is a Nuuchalnuth man originally from Opitshat on Meares Island and now living at Esowista on Longbeach near what is now called Tofino (B.C.).

The three Vancouver Island Knowledge Keepers are actively involved in traditional Indigenous healing work. All are Indian Residential School (IRS) Survivors who have dedicated themselves to working with our people in the ongoing healing of the legacy and the impacts of the IRS system. At almost ninety-seven years old Aunty Doll is known as a “Record Keeper” throughout the Okanogan territories. She is a first generation survivor of the Indian Residential School and daughter to a well-known and renowned Medicine Healer of the Syilx (Okanogan) Territories, Julia Surprise (Marsel/Richter). All of the Knowledge Keepers in this study are well respected and honored for the gifts they carry and generously share with others and for who they are as individual Elders.

The Stories

1. Can you share with me what you know of the ceremony of the ancients before contact?

Victor and Joyce – The four pillars of the Long House represented the “Old Ones”. The teachings before Europeans were to live with “one heart one mind”. The old ones were

the wisdom, the knowledge and honesty (truth). Everyone knew their function in the community each person had their role; everyone had a place of importance.⁶

Aunty Doll – Cleansing your soul...cleansing your body. My Mom always talked about different things. If you have something bothering you.... you tell about it. You don't hang on to things. The whole family sweats together...don't have problems left behind. You don't have things you are worrying aboutyou can live your life. If somebody has a problem right away you take care of it and this is good for the body. This is the way it should be handled. Things have to be cleaned off and cleansed off as they happen. They make you sick if you hang on to it....you have to take it off right away, talk about it then your mind is free. And you aren't thinking bad thoughts; bad thoughts make our body sick. It is good when you are thinking good things your body is good, healthy.

Gerry – There were animals that were gifted to each family as their protector or helper. The animal world was recognized as their helpers. The relationship to the Salmon...the first caught was put back. There was respect between the animal world and humans. When I was a child we would go with the adults to harvest the olligan.... children ran "amuck" while in the woods there was no fear that the animals would hurt us....it was like a silent agreement existed that there be respect amongst the unseen world and animal worlds. A mutual respect existed we learned from them and we respected the animals for that. They are ways to behave with one another and how we treated the animal world and all of creation.

Levi – That brings to mind right away what I heard the elders say ...the most valuable resources we have is our spiritual connection. We are the connection to the past, present

⁶ See Appendices 4 and 5: Victor's hand-drawn diagrams of the Long House way before contact.

and future. We can connect through the present to the past and to the future. Our ancestor's greatest gift was their connection to spirit. The teachings everything that we do...like if someone wanted to be a warrior they would go to the forest and protect themselves...even their enemy would be respected...everything was connected to a spiritual practice. When I wake up I thank the air...air is one of the most important. I come in and drink some water... when the sun comes up that represents the fire. The mother earth surrounds me and holds me. All of the elements.... are thanked....

2. Have you practiced Traditional Ceremony?

Victor and Joyce – All through the years we participated strongly in the long house, Canoe paddling, there are lots of teachings that involved living in a good way, healthy food, being prepared. When playing Slahal (a game of guessing and memory) one must prepare it is done in a respectful way even when you win! it is not good to brag if you win. If you show off it means that you are up there and the other is down there. We have to treat everyone evenly because next time you will be down there. Play the game and then still be friends. We practice our culture, sweat lodge, smudging, and spiritual cleansing in the water. Quatit (Spirit bath).

Aunty Doll – Sweats with the whole family, singing, leave your body free and clean. Mom learned her song from her mother (Sophie/Colville) Indian language came from her mom.

Gerry – I learned about the importance of paying attention to my dreams. Cleansing in the ocean water, cold water, and cedar. Cedar bark for protection until we crossed into the “supernatural world”

smoke from the hemlock to cleanse on the way into the big house....cleanse....floor in the ceremony...eagle down....

When the animals come out it is to show the families this is who is here to protect youthese animal beings are the ones who will share their strength...the reason we have the crest on our blankets is because we are acknowledging our teachers. the animals are our teachers....there was a time when humans and animals understood and talked with each other. they taught us how to live. We all had communities and we shared knowledge. it was the time of the supernatural world....even supernatural beings were connected....every village has these different treasures....these animal beings....why people are still close to this world.

Levi – First time...I had heard that one of my grandfathers was a healer....I wanted to be like that. So I went out into the forest and connected to the spirit, ancestors. I sang to them that I wanted to be like my grandfather.....to be able to work with my people. I didn't get any answers when I was out there....nothing happened. But when I came back people started coming to me telling me and showing me the things that we do for healing.....

3. Can you describe what happens in your body, mind, spirit and emotions when you practice ceremony?

Victor and Joyce – Before – maybe your mind is cluttered, racing, mind is turning all the time for an exam or finances. When you stop and do ceremony you literally clear your mind, your heart and your spirit, the answers come freely to you. de-stresses you. Talking from the heart. In residential school we weren't allowed to ...we were taught not to cry. If you can cry you can heal, cleansing. Spiritually it is a big lifting because you learn you

can talk about things. Clear...it clears and opens up that space in time...more courage....more strength.

Aunty Doll – After ceremony you feel good...like a bath...there is a good feeling after. You feel clean and light. My Mom was born in 1877, when she was 8 or 9 she went to the Catholic Mission by horseback. They went to the Mission in Kelowna went to Pandosies Mission. Her mom and dad...Father Pandozie gave her first apple. She has witnessed ceremony...it is personal and you don't talk about it. She has seen the ceremonies and witnessed people who were sick become not sick and then years later. Spotted Lake Medicine Lake, and hot springs near Similkameen. First how they knew about it was because some Indians saw an old crippled up bear come along and go in the water and hang around in the water for a couple days. After when the bear was leaving it was walking normal and healthy, that's how they came to know about it. They were watching the bear and it showed them what to do. He went in crippled and came out good. G/grama went there a few times and she brought the water back. It was used for an uncle to clear. Hot Springs was bought by a white guy who thought he would make it better and he ruined it. Orville Hot Springs does not exist anymore. Spotted Lake was purchased by the Okanagan Alliance.

Gerry – Cleansing in the ocean water, cold water, and cedar. Cedar bark for protection until we crossed into the “supernatural world”

Levi – A lady came to me and said we are going to be taking Reiki....I didn't know what Reiki was....I had never heard of it. I agreed to go...I took reiki level one...I found out that reiki was the very same thing that our ancestors did ...it just had a different name. In our language we call it Pluupa...you know like hands on. Life force....channeling the

energy....

nnywasum....to go and sit and be quiet and listen...when they uppsir...become one...we get our answers in silence...it means you have to be quiet and go inside and listen...not just animals also plants....to nature. Ask a question then be quiet...listen. One time it was really stormy. I was thinking that gee it was a miserable day...nature was doing what it needed to do...because of everything that we do...we create pollution so nature needs to do its work to cleanse the earth...the message I got at the time we to become one with nature to be cleansed.....with the water and the wind.....connect with naturethe peace and the serenity. The storms and the weather was nature doing her work.... cleansing the earth...cold, wind, rain, snow, intense sun...she has to be harsh because of what we are doing to her.

In circle some healing was being demonstrated. Some pain came into the healer when healing but this is just for us to know in order to work on someone else. Another pain felt belonged to someone else. The healer is being lead.

4. When did you first learn of Traditional Ceremony?

Victor and Joyce – After I left residential schoolJoyce when she got married. through the long house. Victor's mom and dad took him down into the states. They still weren't allowed to practice in the 60's. In the summer time...when away from residential school they were taken to the long house to learn traditional ways. They were told in residential school that their family was over there and they would point to images of hell....and then they would point to images of heaven and tell the kids that this is where they wanted to send them. Joyce expresses how most of the kids didn't want to go there anyway because their relatives weren't there. She remembers hearing a story of some

Day School kids that were told by the nuns who had the school close to where a Big House was that the nuns would point to the big house and tell the kids that their family members who went there were going to hell to burn because they went in there.

Aunty Doll – Great Grama...her mom. smudge.....when the old ladies came to see her they went in to a room by them selves....we could hear them sing. When she heard there was dancing going on she would know...she wanted them to stay away, it was illegal then....they hid it then.

Gerry – The understanding of how we look after ourselves was taught to us while we were young. There is a relationship with the animal world...there was respect that they fed us...there is a respect Granny Ahouu....there were stories of how to behave. There were stories about mink who always got into trouble....teachings....grandmother on my mom's side was a mid-wife.

Cleansing....after each person that is workedthe hand movements are cleansing the hand movement are moving energy toward the fire....always wash....always with cold water...always clean...always the surroundings clean it offwatching her hands I see her doing hand movements as though she is moving energy away from her. Very big stress on clean self...cleaning homes....it's all about the energy...without saying those words....our ancestors knew thisthey were doing this...

There are many teachers....many circles....some of the old people.....those that were not Christianized.....can share...the stories.....

Levi – When I was a kid....watching...listening....observing ...my father.....it was like they had me facing my back even when I was a baby...over the years I still feel this. At that time they were going to bring me up as a warrior or strong man. So they were going

to bring me up that way but residential school interrupted that. Born into ceremony....IRS 7 years...drew him out of it. Told over and over again that the ways of the people were wrong. The ways of the Catholic Church was the only way. The peoples way was wrong...weren't allowed to talk about it. The family that stays together prays together...he would worry about his father. Our church is wherever we are...what we are connected to. We offer up everything we do....offer everything you do in a day as a prayer...everything that I do is a prayer. Offering a cup of coffee is a special prayer in itself....when I go out and see a stranger and smile...that is an offer....sharing and connecting with another. I don't need to sit and say certain words....live a prayer....live in prayer.

after losing his way for a time ...went to a sweat lodge...first time...never been before....while in there things started to come back to him from his youth.....traditional knowledge.....he began to practice them again. The more he practices the more he knows....the more he remembersit is also about the future...we are the future ancestors....we are connected to the past and to the future.

The animals are the ones that are sent.....when I was going to residential school. One of the things they were saying was that creator or god sent an angel....we have animals sent. Sasquach....my father told me about this couple that went out into do a spirit quest....they went for years....on the new moon. 4 days...4 nights....they built a cabin a shack and they would stay there and do their spiritual ceremonies....at night...his wife was inside the cabin doing her prayers her ceremony....rest during the day....for years...no messages...this time the husband said this will be our lastthey had a ladder there was a hole through the roof....

Practice and use your gift with honour and respect. If you receive it and then tell about it you will lose it. Use it with humility....we don't share it. There is one plant in the wilderness that will hold onto that gift for you. When you need to do things that you think is beyond your capabilities you can go to this plant. Receive with honor and respect and humility, then and only then will you retain it. If you talk about it you can lose it....if you try to impress others you can lose it.

5. Can you describe or talk about what sorts of trauma you have experienced in your life?

Victor and Joyce – Joyce's mom died when she was very young and was at the mercy of mean step moms, and was at the mercy of relatives that were drinking. She was in the hospital a lot and actually felt safer in the hospital.

Victor – had to keep their feelings in. When he lost his dad they had to keep their feelings in- this led to a lot of drinking. Shortly after their Dad passed they began to be able to practice again so they were able to mourn their mom when she passed.

Aunty Doll – Just like everyone I have many losses in my life. Dad died when I was small. I have seen lots

Gerry – As most people I have experienced sexual and physical abuse....the first healer was the natural world....I would find this old big rock and sit on it and cry and cry....it was like the rock reached its' hands up to me and held me...so when I left that rock I felt good....that was my first healer and my first healing....nature...each time something happened I would go back to that rock...

Levi – Sacred pool...cleansings....there is relief after we using ceremony....but then sometimes we invite it back....by doing the same things.....

6. Can you talk about whether practicing ceremony has helped you deal with your experiences of trauma?

Victor and Joyce – In 1989 they began to deal with problems using traditional ways, it is a journey. Now when hard times hit, how do you deal with it. Prayer, song, family song is the most powerful. Celebrate what they have rather than focusing on what they don't have. Stopping to say thankyou.

Victor – Brothers and sisters when there is lots going on...then family step in to help. The family unit is there for all. Unwritten law...family steps in for them. **“Nuts’amaat shqwaluwun”**....every one work together.

Aunty Doll – After ceremony you feel good...like a bath...there is a good feeling after. You feel clean and light. 1877 great grama was born. When she was 8 or 9 she went to mission by horseback. They went to the mission in Kelowna. Her mom and dad...Father Pandosy gave her first apple. She has witnessed ceremony...it is personal and you don't talk about it. She has seen the ceremonies and witnessed people who were sick become not sick and then years later. Spotted Lake our medicine lake, and hot springs near Similkameen. First how they knew about it was because some Indians saw an old crippled up bear come along and go in the water and hang around in the water for a couple days. After when the bear was leaving it was walking normal and healthy, that's how they came to know about it. They were watching the bear and it showed them what to do. He went in crippled and came out good. Great grama went there a few times and she brought the water back. It was used for an uncle to clear. Hot Springs was bought by a white guy who thought he would make it better and he ruined it. Orville Hot Springs does not exist anymore. Spotted Lake was purchased by the Okanagan Alliance.

Gerry – I was a young woman when I learned of different healers and went to different healers from different traditions....they shared their teachings with me....I do brushings....cleansings....

When someone comes to you for brushings...what do you notice from them after. They always feel lighterthey feel lighter not being aware of what they are carrying...they always come away feeling better....I take things off of them....I work with the spirit....I only go as far as they can go....lifting a bit at a time....or sometimes there is something deeper and it is wanted to come out...the spirit is ready to release it....I can feel if it is ready to go...it can be very dramatic with vomiting...crying...

We call on the spirit world to ask what this person needs...it is not based on what we learned in a book ...not based on ego and mind....we are guided....by spirit....that is how we are trained and as indigenous people....we have an indigenous psychology....it does not go by what some book says...but what the person's spirit says....

Sometimes it feels like we are always waiting for them to catch...they insist on being the experts....we have to jump through their paradigms that do not suit our reality. Our ancestors knew...they were doing this work long before others came herewe are masters at energy work...we can see how energy moves.....

Levi – Energy is life...energy is the spirit.....many cannot see it...but when we are connected we feel it....connecting to the higher self.

Four powerful elements are..... fire, water, earth, water....not one can sustain life by itself....not one can work by themselves...they need to connect they all need to work together....what connects these four elements is spirit...energy holds it....

One thing that comes to mind is a healing workshop.... asking me to do cleansings.... they were talking about the different sicknesses our people have now....they talked about the food that our people were eating was causing them to become diabetic. You know the ceremonies that we do...when the negative energy...from bad experiences.... we could do the same thing with our food. And the things that we drink...we can cleanse our food...just by thinking of it while focusing on our intent.

Chapter 5

Emerging Themes

As I read over my notes and reflected on the teachings I had been given through these conversations the following themes began to emerge. Each has been itemized and expanded with further comments from the Knowledge Keepers.

Connection. Each of the Knowledge Keepers talked about the importance of connection. Right away in response to the first question, “what do you know of the ceremony of the ancients before contact” the Elders spoke of family, community, helping one another, every member has a role, equality, and respect for each other, every member of the community or family shared not only in the harvest but also in pain. Victor stated, “families supported one another through “unwritten laws” if one member was down or hurt another stepped in for them “Nutsa’maat Shhwqwal iwun” which is Halkomenum (Coast Salish language) for being as one, all working as one. The teachings were to live with “one heart, one mind” the Old Ones were “ the wisdom, the knowledge and honesty; everyone knew their function in the community, each person had their role. Victor’s diagrams of the Long House (appendices 4 and 5) show how several families lived together each having their own section or place along the perimeter, the four pillars were the “Old Ones” the floor was sacred, everyone learned and shared together. One is careful to not brag or get carried away with their ego because this behavior meant that you would be making yourself better than others or above them.

Aunty Doll talked about the whole family in the Sweat Lodge together, problems were talked about and “let go of” or taken care of right away as they happened. Her Mom

learned her song from her Mom and it was shared when others in the community came for healing even though this was done now behind closed doors. My great grandmother was afraid because the ceremonies were illegal she didn't allow her kids to go the Winter Dances though they continued to happen in secret others in the community continued to practice together. Connection also involved the animal world and as long as humans respected them they respected humans by sharing their strength and survival wisdom.

Gerry talked about when humans got quiet enough they could watch and learn from the animals who showed themselves to them, but only when respect was shown for all of the beings that lived in the territory. Communities in turn shared knowledge that included knowledge they gained from the "super natural world" which was connected as well to every community in its own way as long as life was lived with respect for all of creation that surrounded them.

Levi talks about the connection to spirit and how it is our most valuable resource. And how the Ancestors greatest gift was their connection to spirit. Something that really stood out for me was when Levi said, "we are the connection to the past, present and future" we can connect through the present to the past and the past to the future, these are very powerful words. Our ceremonies are not lost no matter that we couldn't practice them for a time they are still here within our memory. I believe my experience of "blood memory" is evidence of that along with many others who discover that they "remember" something that was never taught in the western conventional style of learning.

When we "re-connect" to the earth our Great Mother and all of creation and practice the ceremonies of our Ancestors upon her, we return to a place of balance with the natural world.

Cajete (2000) states,

Ecological communities revolved around practiced relationships at multiply levels of personal, family, and community life. The child born into this web of relationship first experienced the ecology of tribal community with the mother, father, and extended family; later this learning extended to include clan and tribe. In the natural environment that formed the backdrop for all relational possibilities, the child learned the multiple roles of family, clan, plants and animals and the special place in which he lived. These roles were not haphazard; they mattered to the survival of the community and to the continuation of the special relationships the community had established with its particular part of the natural world (p. 98).

Levi talks about the four powerful elements fire, water, earth and water making the connection that not one can sustain life without the other. These elements need one another in order to work, they need to connect and work together and what holds them is, “spirit,” and spirit, is “energy,” that is what holds them together. The term “all my relations” is our way of acknowledging and showing respect for our connection to all living things.

Cleansing. The idea of cleansing ones body, mind, spirit, and emotions is mentioned again and again it has earned its place as a theme. Emerging throughout the stories and conversations with the Knowledge Keepers came descriptions of how important it was to perform rituals of cleansing in a variety of ways. Victor and Joyce mention sweat lodge, smudging and spiritual cleansing in the ocean and river water or having what is called “spirit baths”. As a reminder I am not going to write about details of the ceremonies of cleansing, if you want cleansing you will need to seek the help of a Traditional Healer. Joyce says before a ceremony your mind might be cluttered, racing, your mind is turning all the time for an exam or finances when you stop and do these ceremonies it will literally clear your mind, your heart and your spirit, answers will come freely because it de-stresses you. Stress can be felt as unreleased energy in the body often from a traumatic

experience. This energy continues to try and release itself; this is what causes problems. When we feel stressed it can be hard to function in the world for many of us. Another cleansing is releasing tears Victor states that, “in residential school we weren’t allowed to cry” he goes on to say that if we can cry we can heal because it is cleansing. Spiritually we are lifted and can talk about things, we are clear, a space in time is opened giving more courage, more strength.

Aunty Doll talks about cleansing the soul; cleansing the body she learned different things from her Mom (Great Grama). Aunty Doll states, “if somebody has a problem right away you take care of it this is good for the body, this is the way it should be handled. Things need to be cleansed off as they happen; they make you sick if you hang on to it you have to take it off right away. Then you talk about it and set your mind free, you aren’t thinking bad thoughts; bad thoughts make our body sick. It is good when you are thinking good things your body is good”. According to Levine the need to protect oneself trauma may cause an incredible amount of energy to be mobilized. If this energy cannot be discharged through mobilization and if, instead our systems of defense are thwarted we move into a state of paralysis or tonic immobility. This causes our metabolism to shut down so that we no longer are using oxygen. The trapped and suppressed energy is what causes the tensions, discomfort and often painful symptoms within our bodies and thought process’s (Levine, 2010). Fragments of sensory memory is what is being held back and is what needs to be released in a gradual way in order for us to re-store our vitality. It takes a lot of energy to hold the “fragmented energies down” we can’t really ‘live’ our lives fully because of expending so much energy to keep it down”. The more I learn the more I think this is what leads to depression, numerous medical

health ailments, including diabetes, addiction and explosions of rage amongst other problems within my community. Aunty Doll says, “After ceremony you feel good like after a bath there is a good feeling you feel clean and light”.

Gerry also talks about cleansing in the ocean water, cold water and cedar. Cedar grows plentiful on Vancouver Island and is regarded as a sacred plant and used for many things by the people of all three tribal nations here and in many other locations where it grows. Smoke from burning Hemlock is used to cleanse for people as they walk into the Big House (ceremony house). Gerry cleanses after each person she works on with the smoke from burning sacred plants. In reference to some spirit dancing Gerry states, “the hand movements are cleansing. The hand movements are moving energy toward the fire...always washing the energy in the air....always with cold water...always clean...always the surroundings clean it off,” While Gerry is saying this I am watching her hands I see her doing hand movements as though she is moving energy away from her in a slight circular pattern. She talks about there always being a very big stress on cleaning oneself and cleaning homes. When Gerry does healing brushings or cleansing on someone she states that she notices they always feel lighter, often they are not aware of what they are carrying though they always come away feeling better. She states, “I take things off of them, I work with the spirit, I only go as far as they can go, lifting a bit at a time”.

Levi talks about the relief that is felt after using ceremony and the importance of cleansing. A lady approached Levi inviting him to join a group to learn about Reiki.⁷

⁷ Reiki is a healing technique based on the principle that the practitioner can channel energy into the patient by means of touch, to activate the natural healing processes of the patient's body and restore physical and emotional well-being. Reiki energy can also be worked with energetically, without touch. Reiki has its' roots in ancient healing traditions in Japan.

He states, “I found out that Reiki was the very same thing that our ancestors did, it just had a different name. In our language we call it Pluupa, you know like “hands on” life force channeling the energy”. Levi also talked about the cleansing that nature does because of all that we do to pollute the Mother Earth. Levi had an experience and he describes it like this, “I was thinking that gee it was a miserable day...nature was doing what it needed to do...because of everything that we do....we create pollution so nature needs to do its work to cleanse the earth...the message I got at the time was to become one with nature to be cleansed.....with the water and the wind.....connect with naturethe peace and the serenity. The storms and the weather was nature doing it’s work....cleansing the earth...cold, wind, rain, snow, intense sun...she has to be harsh because of what we are doing to her”.

Animals and Nature. It is well known the affinity that First People share with the animal world, our artwork, and ancient carvings, totem poles - the list could go on and on. It makes sense that this would be another reoccurring theme the natural world it is woven throughout the conversations and repeated in reference to almost every one of the questions asked during the interview process. Victor and Joyce talk about the closeness of the ocean to the village as though it was animate and a part of the community. They also shared a great reverence for the medicine that the animal world shares with them as gifts to facilitate the healing work that they do. This ties in with the connections that Cajete (2000) makes about the animal world, “each animal is seen to possess certain special qualities and powers that they may share with humans if they are properly treated. Given this view, animals inspired the lifeway of Native cultures” (p.151).

Aunty Doll talks about a well-known Lake in the Okanogan that has healing properties. She tells the story of how some of the ancestors witnessed a bear that was all crippled up walk into the lake and hang around for a couple of days. When the bear left they noticed that the bear was walking normal. The Old Ones knew to watch the animals to learn from them, watching and learning from the animals is how we have survived they have shown us how and where to heal ourselves.

Gerry very clearly talks about the gifts that the animal world shares with the people she describes how particular animals would show a family that they were there to protect them, to share their strength and to show them how to live. Her Nation honors this by designing images of the animals and making a Crest of the particular animal on their blankets, the animals are being acknowledged as their teachers. Gerry states that there was a time when humans and animals understood and talked with each other they showed the humans how to live. Gerry describes the natural world as the first healer, she talks about how she was naturally drawn to a big rock when she was alone and hurt, she would go there and just cry and cry she felt like the rock just reached it's hands up to her and held her so when she left the rock she felt good, that was her first healer and her first healing; nature. She went back whenever she needed help.

In *Blackfoot Physics*, Peat (2002) states:

Elders tell stories of a time when humans and animals could freely talk together. This era has long passed, but the two-legged are still able to communicate with animals in their dreams and many Native American people talk to rocks and trees. Before the coming of the Europeans who knows how extensive that communication between all aspects of nature may have been (p. 119).

Levi talks about the animals and the natural world as our teachers as well. He describes going into the forest to gain the spiritual strength that was needed for the task

he was to face. He would go there and connect with the ancestors, to spirit, he would watch and listen, he describes listening with his heart his very being. It was very interesting that Levi related what was taught to him by the priests and nuns in residential school of how God sent an angel and how for Indigenous people Creation sent the animals. The animals are our teachers, we emulate them and there is much evidence of that left by our Indigenous ancestors.

Spirit – Energy. The importance of cleansing was mentioned numerous times during the interviews both in the context of ceremony and health and well-being what we have not talked about yet is what we are cleansing. Victor and Joyce talk about doing “brushings” the brushing of ones “energy field” that surrounds their body. Using a variety of the gifts from nature and animals such as a cedar branch or feathers and sage (sacred plant burning) smoke a person is brushed off usually inches from their body. Another technique they use is song and drumming it seems to lift people up and give a good feeling.

In response to the question about what happens in the body, mind, spirit and emotions when practicing ceremony Aunty Doll right away states, “what I tell my people is it starts with the head, think positive. It starts here you got to think and keep clear, think positive! You’ve got to!” She talks about people just giving up because of allowing themselves to become overwhelmed in despair but if they had over the years thought positive it would have cured them. Positive is a term that describes energy. She also talks of drumming, singing, rattling and dancing as therapies that were used to maintain well-being.

Gerry says it’s all about the energy without saying those words our ancestors knew this they were doing this all the time. Gerry was given the name “the Copper that sits in

the Basket of the Wild Woman” this name was given to her at a family Pot Latch the name has been in her family for a long time. It is with honor that she carries this name as it had previously belonged to a healing woman with it a dance was given to her along with the right to practice healing work. When Gerry is brushing people off she says, “it is energy and sometimes there is something deeper and it wants to come out the spirit is ready to release it, I can feel if it is ready to go. It can be very dramatic with vomiting and crying. We call on the spirit world to ask what this person needs it is not based on what we learned in a book not based on ego and mind we are guided by spirit that is how we are trained and as indigenous people we have an Indigenous psychology it does not go by what some book says but what the persons spirit says.

Levi says energy is life, energy is spirit many cannot see it but when we are connected to it we can feel it when we are connecting to the higher self we can feel it. The gifts of healing must be practiced with honor and respect. Levi states, “Practice and use your gift with honor and respect. If you receive it and then tell about it you will loose it. Use it with humility we don’t share it. There is one plant in the wilderness that will hold onto that gift for you, when you need to do things that you think is beyond your capabilities you can go to this plant. Receive your gift with honor and respect and humility, then and only then will you retain it. If you talk about it you can loose it if you try to impress others you can loose it.

When you need to do things that you think is beyond your capabilities you can go to this plant. Receive with honor and respect and humility, then and only then will you retain it. If you talk about it you can loose it if you try to impress others you can loose it”. This is all about energy, Levi says its all about the energy, prayer is energy, live your life

in prayer. Passing a stranger and smiling is passing energy, good energy it comes back to you.

My analysis:

In conversation with Gerry Ambers at the time of the interview she said, “Sometimes it feels like we are always waiting for them to catch up they insist on being the experts we have to jump through their paradigms that do not suit our reality. Our ancestors knew, they were doing this work long before others came here we are masters at energy work we can see how energy moves” (Ambers, 2014). As Indigenous people we hear things by feeling it we have been gifted with many internal resources to heal ourselves.

I have witnessed stories of the experiences that people who have attended many of the residential schools have had and heard about the impact on their lives. Health Canada provides therapeutic counseling to former Indian Residential School Survivors; many do not wish to attend sessions with the counselors who are made available because most offer mainstream models of support. I have witnessed people gravitate to the energy brushings, sage smudges, drumming and other ceremonial healing activities that are available to them. I have witnessed people who refuse the government funded healing options such as the mainstream therapists for visits to our Traditional Healers ceremonial brushings, healings with Drumming, Rattles, Chants, Singing, Brushings of Hands, Sweat-lodge, Winter-dance, Big-house and Sundance ceremonies etc. Ceremony creates a social space where there is a felt sense of safety and connection. Porges and Levine clearly identify the importance of social engagement as an integral step in returning our nervous system to a more regulated place within our central nervous system. Ceremonial space creates an energetic quality of social engagement, which helps people to mobilize

energy. The dorsal vagal state is shifted out of immobility to mobility ceremony restores movement that has been frozen. An example could be the sensations of tingling all over such as what I described in my experience while witnessing the Mask Dance ie: tingling within the central nervous system reflects a shift in a neural state from immobility (freeze) to mobility.

Engaging in the ceremonies of our ancestors connects us to our ancestral memories as we practice ceremonies to heal ourselves we will remember how to heal ourselves. I have witnessed people who did not grow up in community with their family as a result of the devastation put upon us as Indigenous people who have learned to weave cedar. To their surprise they all of a sudden could weave the most beautiful cedar hats and other items; this is ancestral memory coming forward. I have witnessed people drumming and begin to sing songs in their language that they did not know or hear previously. I have witnessed people begin to dance the dances of the 'Old Ones' spontaneously at certain places on the earth. If we organize the space to support our traditional healers working with us eventually more and more of our people would remember the path to their own personal healing. The funding of mainstream programs to heal the issues that impact Indigenous people just does not make sense. We need to encourage the development of healing places and opportunities to learn ceremony. In a *Recognition of Being*, Kim Anderson (2000) states, "Reconstructing a sense of the sacred and a sense of purpose into our lives and communities will validate our existence as individuals and will teach us to value the lives of others" (p.237).

Conclusion

Because of colonization we lost our way for a time, we are slowly finding our way back to our indigeneity. Our identity is recovering and we need to find ways to honor the journey that we have been on. The *Indian Act* was implemented in 1876 on this continent to control the Indian and ease or force assimilation of Native people into the dominant culture. The experience of our ancestors was that daily life and spiritual practice was conducted simultaneously and it was through this connection that we remained strong.

Our traditional healers are trusted because of our shared bond of living with trauma; I feel hopeful and excited to be living in the time of our moving forward in the world of this dominant culture, no matter that we live with this legacy we have come to a time where our ancient and powerful teachings are being resurrected. Many Traditional Healers gathered in Vancouver to strategize ways of integrating our healing practices into mainstream medical services. The First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) is currently completing the “Models of Traditional Wellness: A Review of Canadian, American and International Practices”. In summary the research carried out clearly indicates that countries are shifting away from a dependence model that relies solely on western medicine toward a model that allows people to take ownership for their health using a multidisciplinary approach to health. Jackson (1999) further notes that “spiritual wounding” is of special note when treating First Nations children. Jackson, the Assembly of First Nations (1994), note that for treatment to be successful, “it needs to be more holistic, evolving around the being of each person. This includes treatment to address the physical

being, the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the person, as well as the harmony between each of these and the environment. First Nations healing often requires individuals to transcend the ego, rather than strengthening it as western therapies aim to do. No matter what we have been through or what we are carrying deep within, each of us has an innate knowledge and awareness about “energy” even if we are not able to verbally articulate it. Aline LaFlamme, traditional teacher teaches that we are born with seven natural healing powers they are talking, laughing, crying, singing, dancing, yelling/screaming and shaking (LaFlamme, 2014). All of which achieves the result of moving energy in our bodies. We need to remember who we are and our connection to our ancestors. We need to return to our ceremonies like the people of old gathering together and continuously cleansing the negative impacts as humans living on the earth just as our animal relatives showed us. Can we put aside the internalized racism instilled in us through the residential school experience and colonization and look to the ceremonies passed to us from the Old Ones for healing ourselves. Western ways of healing need to be integrated as a compliment to “our healing models” as opposed to the other way around. The first line to healing must be to return to a place of balance and connection; we just need to remember how. I am left with a curiosity of what the results of actually tracking an individual’s journey of healing using various Indigenous ceremonial practices would reveal. All my relations

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Appendix 1: University of Victoria Ethics Board Application, Section I

Title of Project: Can Indigenous Ceremony/Traditional Knowledge Heal the Impacts of Trauma?

Section I – Recruitment Materials

Script – in person

My name is Sheila and I am Syilx from the Lower Similkameen. You now know that I have come to the point in my studies to be a master level social worker and am preparing to write a thesis. As a part of my research for my thesis, I have a question to ask you. I am offering you this tobacco in the way of the Okanogan people as a token of my respect for you. I am listening to stories about the effects of practicing ceremony and traditional healing for the purpose of healing from the impacts of traumatic experiences. I would like to sit with you and ask some question about your experience of using your traditional ceremonies and how you feel they benefit you or not. I will sit with you so that you can tell me what you want in response to the question I pose in the way that you want. It will take about two hours of your time and will take place where you are comfortable. I of course will come to you so that you will not have to travel out of your home. Do you think that would work for you? If not, is there a location that you can suggest that works better for you? If it is ok with you I will be recording our conversation because I want to make sure what I write down is accurate to what you say. I promise that the tape will be destroyed once I am finished my writing. I have a consent form that I will ask you to sign if you agree. Does all of this sound ok and do you have any questions? All my relations.

Appendix 2: University of Victoria Ethics Board Application, Section J

Title of Project: Can Indigenous Ceremony/Traditional Knowledge Heal the Impacts of Trauma?

Section J – Data Collection Methods**Interview Questions:**

1. What do you know of ceremony of the ancients before contact?
2. Have you practiced Traditional Ceremony?
3. What happens in your body, mind, spirit and emotions when you practice ceremony?
4. When did you first learn of Traditional Ceremony?
5. What sorts of trauma have you experienced in your life?
6. Have you used Ceremony for your traumatic experiences?

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: Can Indigenous Ceremony and Traditional Knowledge Heal the Impacts of Trauma?

Researcher(s): Sheila A. Nyman, Graduate Student, Masters Degree Thesis, UVIC School of Social Work, Phone: 1-250-618-6247, Email: sanyman@uvic.ca

Supervisor: Jeannine Carriere, UVIC School of Social Work, Phone: 1-250-721-6452, Email: carriere@uvic.ca

Committee Member: Yvonne Haist, UVIC School of Social Work, Phone: 1-250-472-4133, Email: yhaist@uvic.ca

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:

- The purpose of this research is to look at the benefits of traditional Indigenous ceremony and healing practices as a way to heal from traumatic experiences.

This Research is Important Because:

- This research may have the potential to contribute to the development of effective Indigenous healing strategies for clinical and therapeutic approaches in social work for dealing with issues of mental health, addictions and other manifestations of the symptoms of traumatic experiences.

Participation:

- You have been selected to participate because in your life you have gained knowledge of experiences of trauma and you have gained the skills of traditional ceremonial practices and teachings. You will be asked to speak from your own experiences, no others. The wisdom you have will contribute to this research.

- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position as an Elder Knowledge Keeper, Traditional Healer, Cultural Support, or how you will be treated.

Procedures:

- **Method:** Interview and story sharing
- **Research activities:** The interview will be AUDIO recorded for the purpose of supporting the investigator's memory and destroyed once it is written into story and approved by the participant
- **Duration:** Approximately 2 hours
- **Location:** Participant's home or where the participant chooses

Compensation:

- A traditional offering of tobacco and cloth to honor the Elder Participant, along with food and refreshment.
- It is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants.
- If you would not participate if the compensation were not offered, then you should decline.

Benefits:

- **Participant** – will benefit by contributing to the validation and further acceptance of traditional ceremony and healing methods for Indigenous people and their well-being

- **Society** – will benefit from the addition of another way to heal from traumatic experiences
- **State Knowledge** – long misunderstood Indigenous Ceremony and Traditional Healing will be recognized as positive approaches for working with people affected by traumatic experiences

Risks:

- You may feel fatigued, stressed, emotionally activated (triggered) or you may become mentally uncomfortable
- **Risk(s) will be addressed by:** If you become stressed, tired, uncomfortable in anyway we will stop. Before we begin the interview we will talk about what you need in the event of any of the above mentioned responses and I will have available and ready what it is that you need (e.g.,ie: cedar, sage, sea water, water, traditional medicines and another traditional healer who can be called in to support if you desire).

Researcher's Relationship with Participants:

- The researcher shares a relationship to you as your former traditional ceremony support and helper in various communities in and around Vancouver Island
- The researcher values this relationship. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the researcher encourages you to NOT participate if you have any discomfort or doubts for any reason if you participate.

Withdrawal of Participation:

- You may withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence
- Should you withdraw at any time, your data will be completely destroyed

Continued or On-going Consent:

- The results of the information you share may be used in future by this researcher exclusively for ongoing investigating of the benefits of Traditional Healing
- By signing this consent you are agreeing to her including these results in potential future studies

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

- Participants will be identified by a pseudonym or a made up name will be used where requested
- If you wish the researcher to use your name and information you will be “waiving confidentiality” by signing below that you agree that you consent to be identified by name / credited in the results of the study and that you consent to have your responses attributed to you by name in the results

Storing and Disposing of Data:

- Data will be stored in a locked file. Computer data will be kept password protected
- Location of storing data: Researchers home at 1985 Mollys Way Gabriola Island BC
- Data will be destroyed once the information has been written into the Thesis document
- All written material will be shredded and AUDIO recorded material will be destroyed with the tape in an environmentally safe way

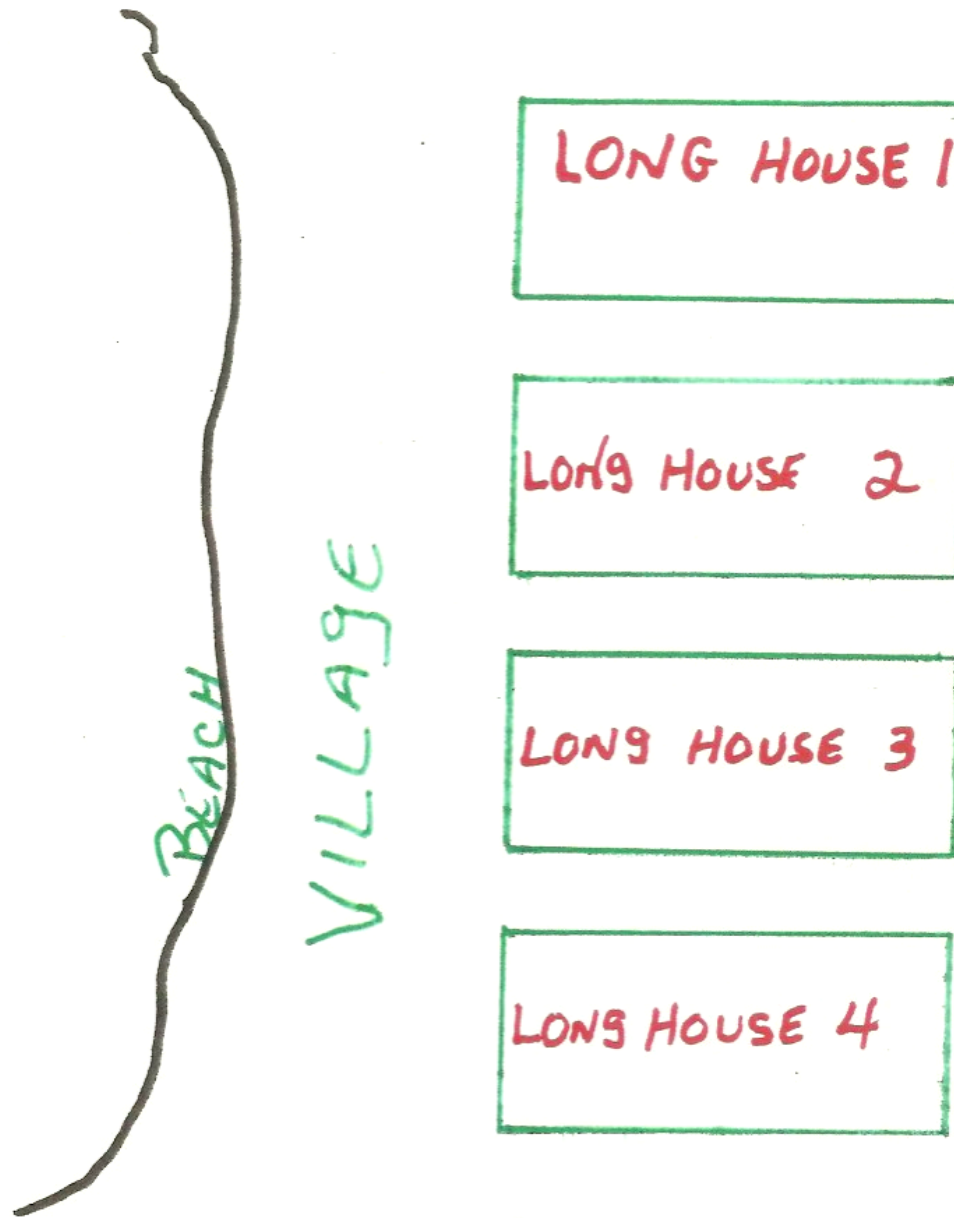
Future Use of Data

I consent to the use of my data in future research: _____ (Participant to provide initials)

I **do not** consent to the use of my data in future research: _____ (Participant to provide initials)

I consent to be contacted in the event my data is requested for future research:
_____ (Participant to provide initials)

Appendix 4: Location of Long Houses



Appendix 5: Long House Interior

