

### All My Relations

Belonging, all my relations. My Indigeneity is central to my sense of belonging. Indigenous culture is rooted in interconnectivity. I find kinship in the soil beneath my feet, the air I breathe, the water I drink, and the billions of people surrounding me. Growing up, my mother would say an Indigenous prayer, one that creates a deep sense of belonging for me. She would repeat, “all my relations.” Fostering interconnectedness is ingrained into Indigenous culture by embracing harmony, unity, and equity.

Harmony has become the foundation of my belonging and the central focus of reconnection with self. It’s easy to lose sight of interconnectivity; we live in a colonialist settler society that seeks to disrupt interconnection. I found my interconnectedness disrupted through racism. In high school, I was told on many occasions to “go back to the red room” or that I did not deserve the “rewards” I was getting by being Indigenous. As an Indigenous student i had access to the Indigenous room, an area of the school where i was supplied with food and academic support. Support other felt i did not deserve.

I could not relate with my peers; I was naïve in nature to believe others did not internalize suffering the way I did. In Indigenous culture, when one person suffers, the community rallies around them. We seek to heal what has been broken. I couldn’t understand the ideology of every person for themselves. Racism as disruption caused profound damage to my sense of belonging. I made every attempt to isolate myself from my community. I constantly punished myself for my desire to be interconnected. I felt the best way to mould myself to fit within the settler colonist framework was to “other” the Indigenous in me. I wore my Indigeneity like a costume only when it benefitted me. By doing so, I reaffirmed negative connotations about my culture. I bought into settler colonist ideologies.

My reconnection came in the form of harmony with the earth. My mother took me on a hike; she asked me to take off my shoes and bury my feet in the soil beneath me. She told me, “When you feel a loss of interconnection and isolation, all you must do is bury your feet in the soil.” She reminded me that I am never alone; I will always be connected. At that moment, my feet grew roots; her words created a forever home. My journey started then, I was hungry for the knowledge my ancestors could provide. I internalize their teachings and embed myself in harmony with the land. In Indigenous culture, we have reverence for the land, we believe in reciprocity, we only take what we need, and we give back when we can. I found a spiritual connection to mother earth and all she blesses us with. The earth gives me all I need; it sustains me, and I respect and sustain it in return. I find peace in knowing I will one day return to the land. My bones and the very essence of my being will feed her.

Indigenous culture inherently differs from dominant worldviews, which can create a sense of unbelonging. Community is central to Indigenous culture. We are interconnected; we create communities wherever we go. We understand that, above all else, we are all children of the land. We find our power within the kinship we create with others. Dominant worldviews are very different from this. The Western world is established around the dominant view that implies every person is a single entity. Examples of this can be seen in our current unhoused population here in Kelowna. Leon Avenue is a central street downtown, it is also home to many of our unhoused peoples and known to the public as a dangerous area. Instead of embracing interconnectivity and helping our fellow people, we are warned to stay away from streets like Leon Avenue; it is deemed hazardous or dirty, and its people are diminished to drug addicts and throw-aways. I will be the first to admit, I bought into those stereotypes, until I met the people

who live around Leon Avenue on a human level. I allowed myself to seek kinship with the people that lived there; I threw away my judgments and biases and leaned into my interconnectedness. The Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society is located in the middle of Leon Avenue. Barbra Jogdics, an employment practitioner and friend with the Friendship Society, honoured me by giving me a tour of their facilities; she also allowed me the opportunity to meet the people within the area. As we walked the street, Barbra talked to every person in depth. She creates kinship and community by referring to everyone as brothers and sisters. Barbra asked them what they needed and welcomed them to seek her out. Barbra demonstrates interconnectivity and its ability to create spaces of belonging. My experience with her further cemented my sense of belonging and gives me the knowledge to create places of belonging within my own community. My understanding of community leads me to the idea of equity for all.

I have struggled a lot with the idea of equity. Equity, to me, is about equal opportunity. When I think about equal opportunity, I think about it in terms of representation. Do I see my people? University life has not always been easy for me. I have struggled with the knowledge that I am one of a limited population of Indigenous people that are attending university. I often am the only Indigenous voice in my classrooms. When researching my future profession, I am met with the telltale faces of white people. I can only find other Indigenous people in selected areas, such as Indigenous classes and assigned buildings. The university can seem inaccessible to my people. This creates feelings of loneliness. For generations, Indigenous people have fought to reconcile this; we fight to build equity. Indigenous culture believes in providing to everyone in ways that meet their unique needs; we understand that all people have different circumstances.

I am an Indigenous status person from the ancestral land of Tk'emlups te Secwepemc; being recognized by the government as a status Indian means, among other things, I am provided

funding for my university studies. Funding is used to create equity; it incentivizes and supports Indigenous peoples to access academia. My funding has always been a hot topic. I often avoid mentioning it or excuse myself from conversations when it is discussed. Others use my funding as a weapon. I have been told that I don't look indigenous enough to receive help; they tell me I am lucky and attempt high-fiving me as if I am defrauding the system. They ask about my family; they wonder if I have undergone enough trauma to receive the help I do. Equity is about understanding the complexity of humans, our differing culture, race, gender, identity, economic status, and history. It's about understanding where we come from and creating fair platforms to get us where we need. My mother's teachings about my ancestry made a guiding light for me; she showed me that I will always belong. With the knowledge of harmony, unity, and equity now under my belt, I can create communities and spaces of belonging wherever I go.

My mother taught me "all my relations."

Kukwstsétsemc