

First Peoples Child & Family Review

An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

Mining Our Lives for the Diamonds

Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux

Volume 8, Number 2, 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071733ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071733ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

ISSN

1708-489X (print)

2293-6610 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

*Aboriginal women across Canada have waited far too patiently for wrongs to be righted and senseless historic and contemporary pain to cease. Today, through narratives like this one, we are undertaking a heroic journey, a journey that begins with **truth**; in fact, it is a journey that begins with the laying down of seven profound Indigenous values, values that are stepping stones to an ancestral home some of us have never visited in our entire lives. This means the gathering up of a collective **courage**, a willingness to begin, to step out and into what we know to be true and waiting for release. So, this is my story, a story that begins like many others...once upon a time*

Cite this article

Wesley-Esquimaux, C. (2013). Mining Our Lives for the Diamonds. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 8(2), 74–81. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071733ar>

An Interdisciplinary Journal

*Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges
of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses,
Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews*

Mining Our Lives for the Diamonds

Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux¹

¹Vice Provost (Aboriginal Initiatives), Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding author: Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, Email: cynthia.wesley@lakeheadu.ca

Abstract

*Aboriginal women across Canada have waited far too patiently for wrongs to be righted and senseless historic and contemporary pain to cease. Today, through narratives like this one, we are undertaking a heroic journey, a journey that begins with **truth**; in fact, it is a journey that begins with the laying down of seven profound Indigenous values, values that are stepping stones to an ancestral home some of us have never visited in our entire lives. This means the gathering up of a collective **courage**, a willingness to begin, to step out and into what we know to be true and waiting for release. So, this is my story, a story that begins like many others...once upon a time*

“It is time’ she said, ‘we have strayed too far, and we need a light to guide us home, will you hold up your life so we can see?” (Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux)

Did you ever have the feeling that something, well maybe someone, was peering over your shoulder with a glint of expectation in their eye and a touch of mirth on their lips, waiting, impatiently probably, for you to move and finally take action? I have felt like that for a long time, and consequently have lived much of my life with a growing realization that my life was really never entirely my own; somehow my life belonged to the many. This is not meant as a grandiose statement or something from an overly large ego, but comes from a funny kind of knowing that wells up from a deeper understanding or a powerful sense of duty from somewhere, quite frankly, beyond me. Perhaps many of us are born this way, maybe it is the Anishnaabek or Haudenosaunee way and we spend our time waiting, or even trying hard to remain invisible, but feeling oh so exposed in our hearts to what must ultimately be. And, I believe we do all eventually come to that place of action – earlier for some, much later for others - but get there we do. Then, what we are meant to be and do with our lives and our deepest love comes bursting into being.

Indigenous women in Canada, and around the world, desperately want to remove the artificial physical, social, emotional, and spiritual boundaries that have created an “us and them” for our people. Together we have watched and felt the subtle shifting and churning that has for so long stymied the ability of our people to right the historic and contemporary wrongs; all of which have created so much pain in our homes, families and communities.

Today, more of us stand ready to undertake that heroic journey, to correct those wrongs, and make right

the future of our nations. Today, I, along with many others, am regularly called to take action. In fact, I believe we have all been walking in the direction of change for a very long time. Along with those others, I am frequently called to find and display those sparkling truths that hold a brighter future for our nations. Some of those sparkling truths come from our elders, who have learned how to be honest with each other and with us over the past few decades about the experiences they had in residential schools and in their homes. They have laid their burdens before us, guiding us carefully through minefields of loss, turbulent emotions, awareness, and change. Some of those sparkling truths come from the hard grit of surviving sexual and domestic violence. And some are reflected back to us through the eyes of children with nowhere to turn, and no one to trust. Yes, there have been some very tough experiences that have buried many a good mind and heart beneath negative emotions that no one person should ever have to carry. But remember, in our history, it has always been “the many” that have helped to carry those heavy burdens of shame, blame, and pain. Today, that reality is not any different and we still have not forgotten to embody the collective in our journey. What is different is that now we are beginning to understand that we must deliberately shoulder new burdens to ensure that our elders and children are not left to carry old generational pain and fear into the future. Those burdens constitute an acknowledgement and acceptance of what is and has been happening around us, in our homes, in our workplaces, and in our communities. It constitutes taking responsibility for the deeper pain and lateral violence, and helping to ensure there is safety in our homes, and in our hearts. It means taking a hard look at those very things that perpetuate dysfunction in our lives; the addictions, which break hearts and homes, damage our unborn, and keep the spectre of poverty dancing wantonly down the dirt roads of our existence. It means telling the truth, one of the seven values that were given to us as guides to a good mind and heart, and speaking against sexual and domestic violence in our homes, communities, and our Nations. The only way to facilitate that healing is to start the talking and writing of narratives that expose the raw honesty and humility required to jumpstart change where it counts – in your life and mine. We already know that a lot of damage has been done in the past, but what about our tomorrow?

So, we must remember that once upon a time, there were residential schools, and they made our people refugees in their own lands, in their own homes, and worse, in their own hearts. As time went by our people passed that darkness, albeit mostly unconsciously, onto those they loved best, and they unwittingly made their children the reluctant witnesses to and victims of the unspeakable and silencing process of assimilation and personal degradation they themselves had been subjected to. Generations of children were forced to wear those same mantels of shame, carrying them down through the next generations because the lens each generation was given in those schools and on increasingly hopeless reserves made the ubiquitous, they – the “power-full” – and our own families and leaders virtually the “power-less.”

It is the larger story of first contact, conflict, dislocation, and residential schools that has become the backdrop to my personal story, and quite possibly yours, because the residential school experience was not my personal experience. I did not attend those schools: I only feel as if that story is my own because of the proximity of pain and anguish that was carried into my life by those who did. That story is one of being carried away by forces that seemingly could not be fought. That story is of a small boy taken from his dad at 4 years old, and of a young girl, followed her many sisters into a strange and scary place, a place where hugs were not given and everything cost dearly. A place where Indian Agents and Missionaries, and Indian Act officials made decisions about our lives out of the arrogance of theirs. The effects of those decisions have lingered amongst our people, like the smell of a dead thing caught way deep under the

porch, where no one wants to go, and so it stays there, as a poignant reminder of our darkest fears. Although, I like to believe that today, the air is finally clearing, and maybe it is because time dissolves everything, even the dead, or maybe it is because we found the resources to tear down the porch and clear everything away for something new and fresh. We have begun to tackle the stories of residential schools in this country and even though the smell immediately got worse everywhere in Canada, I think we can all breathe a bit easier now.

My story has been lived in spite of the many effects of residential school. My story is one of challenge, change, and a returning home to the richness and joy of being “self” and a remembering of the far distant past, before the numbing began, and the darkness hid the truth. My story is about the living of a life where the glory of a far distant past was brought cautiously into the present, where light shines forth from a life held high, and people can be given hope that they too can experience choice and walk with pride in this world. It did not come easily though, and it did not come young. It came with massive uncertainty, shame, a giving away, and a terrible loss of dignity. How can we know, and who can teach us those things that will help us pass safely through the gates of hell on earth and into the arms of a life well lived?

I was raised in Toronto, the Big Smoke, as it is affectionately known. There in my very early days I was exposed to random experiences of sexuality far too young and this coloured my perception of the adult world and my place in it. Too many of the men around me had learned how to exploit and use sex as a weapon against children, and each other, and they used and hurt us without any obvious sense of the damage they were doing. Perhaps they thought we would forget, or forgive, or simply not be affected by their mean groping and forced physical contact. Well, I remember, and research supports the fact that most of us do, unless we have banished those memories to the farthest reaches of our minds or we alter our perceptions to keep those images at bay. However, like many others I also know that even when we build walls in our minds and close our hearts, the fear we felt then is ever present and distorts our vision of the world around us. I know that even if our minds forget, our bodies never do, and we go through our lives with a taint of disgust touching every physical encounter we have no matter how deeply we love or how hard we try to forget. It takes a lot of living, and a lot of personal forgiving to let those demons go, and allow that kind of pain to recede into the past. It takes consciously filling our lives with new kinds of joys, cultivating courage, and putting on a brave face each and every morning. It means washing our bodies, but more importantly cleansing our minds, scrubbing away the taint of lust and forbidden moments, and focusing on what is right with the day, the glory of sunlight, and the knowledge that every step we take takes us further away from the powerlessness that was once ours. We can do this and it doesn't have to take mind-numbing addictions to make it so. But this is where those of us who have come through and defeated those memories, with or without addictions, must step forward and declare our own truths. It is those of us now thriving that must go back and speak to our fears and explain how we overcame the darkness. We must let those young people who have been harmed in the same way know that the blame is not theirs to carry, and they too can walk forward, take our hand, and allow us to show them the light of a better day. It is still happening, this thing called sexual abuse: It is still in our homes and bedrooms. Today though, it is no longer the priests and wardens at residential school, it is us, and therefore it is us that must now make it stop. I am still reading reports and hearing about damages that are being perpetuated against our children by the adults who were once damaged by others, and it has been over 140 years, entire generations, since our people were subjected to the sexual predations of outsiders. But it has to stop now, the children are watching, and if they see and experience this kind of

behaviour today, it will continue into tomorrow.

Humans are an opportunistic bunch, that fact is well documented, so it means that we have to be vigilant and remove opportunity. We as parents, grandparents and siblings have to ensure that we have the courage to say “yes” to speaking out against sexual abuse, and “no” to allowing opportunities where it might flourish. We must act on a willingness to protect. We have to ensure that our children, all of them, have the right and the safety to say “no” and stop leaving them vulnerable in their own homes. It is our business to step in and keep them safe. Our children are gifts from the creator, gifts that can create and sustain a vibrant and positive future. Children are not there to appease sexual desires, or to be neglected and abused in the wake of domestic violence or feel the kind of abandonment that addictions spawn. This means that speaking aloud the words of “cease and desist” are the responsibility of everyone in a family and in a community, not just hired program officers and CAS officials.

Like so many others in our Nations across Canada I was born into a situation that was not entirely welcoming, not immediately anyway, my mother was young, pregnant, not married, and it was 1956. This was not a good time to be born out of wedlock, or a particularly good place to land in this life, because we know that having a strong circle of family can make living a bit easier. However, as time went by and I stumbled and fell, I learned that perhaps it was the very best place in the world to begin becoming who I am today. I had to come in fighting and learn what determination meant, what defeat tasted like, and what shame weighed. Once I figured some of that out, and, that it was up to me to survive, I began to live my life more deliberately, and struggled to cultivate a new awareness. I realized that there could be no more blame if there was to be a life well lived; blame is heavy and difficult to carry. When you carry blame, you cannot pick up anything else, because your heart and mind become too full of the rage and anger that blame breeds and feeds. Blame is a very big and unwieldy burden, and it’s not something that keeps well either: In fact it tends to stink, and makes other people avoid you. I eventually found it best to leave it at the proverbial door, and found something lighter to carry. I found that humour and forgiveness provided better soul sustenance and the materials to build necessary and strong bridges between a powerful life and myself.

One of my favourite statements to the women I work with is, “when you learn to *mine your life for the diamonds*”²² you shall be truly free and moving forward in a good way. What does this mean? It means that we all have to look back to go forward. The question is, when you and I look back, can we locate the tools for living that we have been given out of our sometimes painfully lived experience? I have learned that it is tools built from experience that help us to move forward and release ourselves, and our children from the past. Can we find the hard times, the good times, and, the times well lived, and use those times to inform our present, and to more deliberately inform our ways of being in this world? Can we afford to just let life happen to us, without thought or consideration of what we might do differently and therefore more effectively? Choice bestows the ability to live in multiple dimensions, in spiritual, mental, and emotional worlds that can animate the way you look at the world around you and how you choose to live in it on a physical and tangible basis. What will you find there, when you lift up all the bandages and fixing kinds of things that never really solved or healed anything? I have learned you will find the courage that pulled you through, you will find the grace that made you smile even when you thought you would

²² This phrase was inspired by a Jim Cuddy song entitled, “She Gets Down” from the Light that Guides You Home album.

never smile again, and you will find messages that once deciphered can give you hope. I too had to go back and lead the little girl left there in the wreckage home. I had to find the willful and angry teenager and love her anyway, and I had to find the wisdom she came in with and re-ignite it so she could find her way into the present and appreciate the beauty in her world.

This is where the idea of “*mining the diamonds*” begins to have great utility for our lives. Yes, it (whatever “it” was for you) happened, and yes, it was disgusting and gross and even painful. The thing about it is that it happened, and that will never change. What can change is how we remember it, and what we do with those memories. We have to re-frame our life experiences so we can speak to them with the wisdom we have earned through our survival. We have to see those life events through new eyes, eyes that are older and wiser and can see past our own pain and into the distant past where it all began. This is where we will find the control we did not have then, when we were small, alone, and helpless to stop what we didn’t want, or to get the healthy attention that we needed from those around us. Today, we can take those memories, and re-frame them into something that can help us now and add grace to our walk into the future. We can find our strengths, we can “*victorize*” our ability to keep standing and walking into tomorrow. Perhaps more importantly we can take those memories, enliven them as teaching tools to share and prevent what happened to us from continuing to happen to others, especially other small children and vulnerable women. We can learn and absorb the history of our people since contact, and understand that the ashes we find in our mouths today come from the fires of loss and confusion of yesterday. Understand that the death of millions of our people, the theft of an entire continent, and the rude dismissal of our spiritual, social and governance systems rendered us bereft. So we can grieve, and then we can stand up again, knowing there is good reason for our pain, and a larger reason to keep fighting. We can enliven a future that is informed, strengthened with knowledge, and symbolically cleansed through the fires of living well one day at a time.

This enlivening requires the daily application of the seven values (or grandmother/father teachings) in our lives. This means that the first step we take requires courage, to step out, speak up, and move past the shame. I always place **courage** first because this is what made it possible for me to heal my life. I had to muster up the courage, to say no, to say yes to myself and to others, and to lift my eyes up to wanting more of what is good and right in the world. The next step requires **respect**, for ourselves first, and then for those around us. See the many that have fought for you, who have not abandoned you, who are holding up the light of your existence like sparkling diamonds cast across the snow on a moonlit night. Without respect we cannot find the honour in ourselves, we cannot forgive our perceived weaknesses, we cannot forgive others and we cannot practice living in peace. Then we must have **humility**, because we are not the only ones that have suffered, many have, and that means that we must acknowledge their pain along with our own. We must learn to tell the **truth**, but not by wielding truth as a sword to cut down those who hurt us or did not intervene, but as a light that guides and restores. And, we have to be **honest**, with ourselves first, and then ask ourselves if what happened has become something else, a shield that has allowed us to stay out of life and invisible?

Remember that trickster peering over your shoulder, whispering to you day in and day out? Stop resisting, and listen carefully to those murmured promptings and get involved in making your life right, and bringing hope to those around you who are mired in despair and cannot find their way. These initial values, once you consciously apply them to your life will take you directly through to **love**, they will help

you to empty the jug of resentment, hate, and anger, and fill it with new thoughts and the ability to take your life experience into sacred places where you can help others help themselves. You will also learn to love yourself, and there are many ways to remember this throughout the day, small promptings and words that support and stop you from cutting yourself down. The last value is **wisdom**, and we don't get to wisdom when we allow our pathway through life to be cluttered with ill will and blame. We need to clear the thorny underbrush of lost emotions blocking the growth of magnificent trees of knowledge and pride just waiting to grow in our hearts and our lives and give us strength. The only way to do this is to see, hear, and feel what we have been running from. Those memories can help us heal ourselves by deliberately placing them into a context that allows us to make sense of them, not that it is ever sensible for a grown man or woman to sexually use and physically abuse children, no, you are always correct in declaring that behavior unconscionable. The making sense comes from looking at the larger picture in which the abuse occurred. See and acknowledge the pain that has become generational and has come down from a long way back, pain that hurled our people into an internal world that reeks of shame and blame. We can do much better than that, we can see past our immediate pain to the original source of social and cultural dys-ease for entire nations across Canada and virtually the entire planet, and carefully and lovingly heal it.

I have a picture of myself I created early on in my own journey towards wholeness, it is of a small girl, seated, with her hair hanging down and completely covering her face, her shoulders slumped, her body tight and unyielding. I was asked to speak to that picture the day I created it and explain it to the other women sitting in the room with me. I was unable to find any voice, let alone one that could tell of the terrible pain and confusion locked in that child. I was so choked up from seeing the small child within me so hurt and so alone that all I could produce were heavy tears. That day, I decided to set out very deliberately on a journey of rediscovery, of seeking the child that was me, and giving her the gift of life. It has been a long road, I will not try to fool you into thinking it is easy for me to find my way; the going was slow and painful. I cried rivers of tears, I raged, I denied, I laughed, and I was terribly afraid.

Today, after much therapeutic intervention, intense training sessions, and lots and lots of introspection and telling and re-telling of painful truths, I am free. I have found the peace I so desperately sought through too many unhealthy relationships, sexual and otherwise, by running away, shutting down, and harboring blatant denials and crooked beliefs; and it feels good. I turned the light on myself and saw the darkness banished. I went back to school, I learned to think straight, I believed in myself, and I spoke out loud and clear to those who would have me remain silent. In the end, I earned the highest academic degree possible; today I walk with a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto, an achievement that gives me multiple options in life. I have never forgotten where I come from, I have not forgotten that humility is a virtue, and I work hard to demonstrate that this kind of achievement is within reach of our people. I never forget that my education is a gift that allows me the privilege of working hard for our children and our Nations.

I have gone through many changes in my life, and so will you, just remember to embrace that change, and put it to work. I have worked my entire professional and academic career to protect the interests of native peoples in Canada. I have fought for treaty recognition, territorial jurisdiction, and a share of the resources of this beautiful country so that our people can thrive. This is what an education has given me, the ability to speak and be listened to, to fearlessly tell the truth, and to take our messages into places

where it can resonate and break down barriers. I have run for a federal seat in the Canadian government. Turn coat? No, it is just another next step in amplifying the voice of our communities and our young people who are ready to move into the 21st century on their own terms. I can see clearly the need to do intensive public education, even for our own peoples who have lost so much of their history because it was stolen through traumatic experiences engendered across this land by colonial powers. We have a proud and beautiful history that has been left by the wayside, discarded like so much debris, but it is in our power to pick it up, dust it off, and carry it proudly into the future in full view of our children.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this story, this life is not my own in so many ways, yes; I am living it and feeling the grief, the joy and the relief. Like you though, I am also living it for many others, guiding, prodding, and hoping that others will step on a path that encourages them to choose life. I am living for the elders who lost so much in their own childhoods, I am living for my children so they don't have to carry the pain of ages or even my pain, I am living for those I love and have contact with as a friend, and especially as my partner. I am living for the ones who cannot see, for the hearts that are broken, and the ones that want to dance. The trickster giggles in my ear sometimes at my audacity and I laugh out loud with the pleasure of knowing that we have not forgotten ourselves completely, and yet sometimes the sobs of those still fighting to survive fill my heart and head with desperation and fear. Where will we go tomorrow, will we learn to be vigilant, will we have the courage to step up and say no? Can we say yes to our own beauty? Can we wipe our eyes with the softness of doeskin so we can truly see, unblock our ears so we can hear the pleas of our youth, and drink the bounty of the rains so we can speak words with clarity, grace and wisdom?

This is a paper that I hope will be read by women, young women, old women, women of strength, women of colour, women of healing, women of rage and despair, and women of hope. In that light, I hope that I have made it clear that like them, I feel a strong commitment to making the wrongs so many of us have experienced, right. I feel a powerful dedication to the young girls and vulnerable women who are still fighting to be safe, whose tears have not yet been shed, and those that have found a hardened heart a better place of refuge. It isn't, it will make you feel safe for now, and it will keep out some of the pain. The problem is, it will also keep you locked in, and you will still have to learn, just like the rest of us, that the only way out is the removal of one heavy stone at a time. The good news is that we can help each other and, there are more women who have walked to a sacred place of healing in their own minds and hearts than ever before in our history. We are on the move, and we are making a difference, and we will win many more battles. Over the next twenty years, we have the opportunity to profoundly influence the trajectory of our young people's lives and our communities into the future. We have access to education and women are taking advantage of this wonderful opportunity and utilizing their knowledge to amazing effect. We have an incredibly young population ready to take on the world on their own terms and win. We have a stronger sense of who we are as a people and can teach the foundations of our beliefs and history in many circles. We can "*mine our lives for the diamonds*" and tell stories of strength, feminine grace, and an enduring power for living. I call it "*victorizing*" and that means calling forward the narratives of survival and transforming them into stories of continuance and courage.

We are still here, and we will be here tomorrow, and the day after that one...

Miigwetch, Cynthia...

Vice Provost (Aboriginal Initiatives) Lakehead University

Nexen Chair in Aboriginal Leadership

Chippewa of Georgina Island First Nation, Ontario