



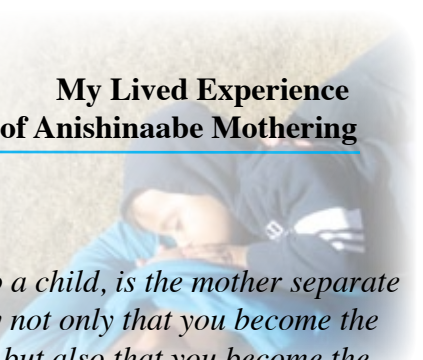
## MY LIVED EXPERIENCE OF ANISHINAABE MOTHERING

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### Abstract

Using an arts-based inquiry has been a liberating experience for me in exploring my lived experience as an Anishinaabe mother. Marrying arts-based inquiry with indigenous autoethnography has had a centering effect on my research. This arts-based autoethnography has opened my heart to meanings that I had not considered. I had never perceived research to be a process where photos and my own story could capture my feelings and contribute to understanding the complexity of mothers as teachers among First Nations people. Using photography was a process of inquiry through my heartfelt passion, where words may have failed me. Wilson (2008) reiterates the importance of “checking your heart,” which he writes is a “critical element in the [Indigenous] research process” (p. 60). He believes that by bringing no harmful intention or feelings to the work we can work from a place of the heart like a ceremony. For me this work has helped me understand myself on another level, which has contributed to my growth as a researcher and a mother. I hope this visual essay will encourage other First Nation mothers to explore their relationships with their children and the complexities amongst our families. What is it that we collectively perceive to be our role as mother? What is our collective lived experience? Do they relate? What are our lived experiences of Anishinaabe Mothers in cities? What about birthing, how do we retain a cultural connection to this sacred life event? Why is this important? These are a few of the many questions that an arts-based Indigenous autoethnography could explore. I share my exploration.

## My Lived Experience of Anishinaabe Mothering



*At that moment of giving birth to a child, is the mother separate from the child? You should study not only that you become the mother when your child is born, but also that you become the child. (Miller, 2006, p. 3)*

My Anishinaabe name is Ma-ka-day-go-be-wiik. I was born in North York, Toronto, Ontario to Diane from Pic River, First Nation, Ontario and Reginald, from Greens Cove, Newfoundland. My parents met downtown on Gerrard St. in a Celtic pub in the later part of the 1960s. My dad had left his home situated in an outport fishing village near Change Islands, Newfoundland, as the eldest son to find work, and my mom landed her first position at North York General Hospital, in Toronto. I am a member of Pic River First Nation or Begtekong, which means “where the river meets.” Pic River is located along the north shore of Lake Superior in Canada. We are part of the Anishinabek Nation and one of seven Anishinabek communities that line the north shore of Lake Superior, yet our Nation spans throughout the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba and the northern portions of the United States along the Great Lakes regions. Although Pic River is located in the Robinson Superior Treaty Group, our community has never been a signatory to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850. We have maintained our position on this through our longstanding comprehensive land claim agreement initiated in 1985, but not yet signed (Chief Roy Michano, personal communication, July 2010).

As a mixed race Anishnabek, I grew up welcomed into both communities but lived geographically close to Pic River First Nation during most of my childhood so considered that place to be home, as well as Marathon, the place where I actually grew up. I was born in North York, Toronto, and for my first seven years I lived and grew in Scarborough, Ontario. The neighborhood, Malvern, bordered by Finch,

Markham, Morningside and Sheppard was one of the most multicultural neighbourhoods in Toronto. I have two sisters, Chantelle and Nicole. Shortly after the birth of Nicole, my parents decided it was time to head back to Pic River First Nation to leave the city life and be closer to my mother's family.

For temporary shelter, we moved to a home off-reserve, which my mother refers to as a "cabin," yet was really a retired gas station in Heron Bay North—this place was home to other families who could not live on the reserve because they too had married off-reserve, and I suppose some lived there by choice. The shock of the move was confusing at first, but I fit in with the children and loved my new life in northern Ontario. My mother hand-delivered a letter to her community asking for a home for her children but her Band ignored this request. Revisions to the Act have changed since that time, but re-settling was not an option for my mom because that would mean giving up her current home, which she felt unprepared to do. Under the Indian Act, a woman who married out of her race became considered a non-native. Lawrence (2003) writes how the Indian Act severed families like mine and how the Indian Act Policy "forcibly remov[ed] tens of thousands of Native women and their descendents from their communities for marrying non status or non-Native men" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 6). Having no hope in her community and raising a young family, which I am sure caused stress, my parents bought a home in Marathon, a short 20 kilometers drive away.

For the first time in my life, I remember how the impact of racism became an ordinary part of my life. I remember being picked on for the first time for being "too dark," and later in life "too white." Racism was not a concept I had known in Toronto. Making friends was easy in a small town though. I grew up with many great people, and so close to Lake Superior that the sound of the water roar was constant. I maintained relations with my family in Pic River First Nation, and found freedom sunning in the sand dunes with sisters, smelling the cedar forests, and being with family on reserve for most holidays and other family events. I found joy growing up in northern Ontario. Like most of the others I grew up with, I think we were fortunate to experience a life so close to Mother Earth.

## Visual Stories

I have always been a visual thinker and felt that my education in the public system was limiting as visual art was often devalued. Using arts-based inquiry allowed me to answer my self-directed question about my experience as an Indigenous mother by using pictures, and as a result, a story was told. For me this is relevant. Cole (2008) describes her methodology as the "academy of the kitchen table" in which storytelling around the kitchen table is her method of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Her conversations at the table were where she "learned opinions of her own, felt pleasure and pain, learned compassion, made promises to [her]self about how [she] would be in the *world* and what [she] would do" (p. 56). I too learned this way—with my mothers, aunts, and sisters. My mother prided us as a family who ate meals together. Each day we sat down as a family when I was a child, and teen, where my dad had some story to tell— even if it was just about his day at the mill. Usually though, there were the stories of his childhood in Newfoundland, and the struggles associated with this. My dad, born in 1950, left home when he was 16 years old, just as most of his peers did in that era, because of the economic need to support himself. I learned from my dad about his history by listening to him. King (2003) relates that "the truth about stories is that's all we are" (p. 2). From my dad, I learned this to be true. The stories my dad shared of his youth and life experiences are special to me. What I understood from this experience of storytelling, is from stories told in my family I learned about looking inwards, solving conflicts, and understanding this as a mode of inquiry which I was comfortable with.

King (2003), however, also cautions writers and storytellers to think about the stories they are letting loose into the world:

For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the kind of stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the type of stories being told. (p. 10)

Storytelling is sacred to my family, and has been a way in which I have learned about the world from my family. Photos have also been important. My maternal grandmother kept photos of our family in a large red picture album in her home, and each time I visited her, there was a ritual between us as we looked at pictures and she told me who was who and the historical context of each picture. Other times though, we would just look at the photos, taking in each picture for what the image meant to us, what emotion was shown, and what story could be portrayed. I'm pretty sure each time I went to visit her in Pic River First Nation I pulled out her photo album and we would look together, never tiring at the images. Using photos to tell my mothering story is a voice that comes naturally to me.

### **My Images: Self Location**

The images I took were part of an arts-based course in my graduate studies that enabled me to examine my lived experiences. This was important for me because it was a way for me to understand where I fit into research, and that I carry two very important responsibilities—one to my family as a mother, and second, in telling the stories from my thesis which spins in a similar direction and looks at how Land is significant for Anishinaabe youth in their learning and health. For me, crucial to my work is self-location. Kovach (2009) writes about *Indigenous Research* and that “[t]his is about being congruent with a knowledge system that tells us we can only interpret the world from the place of our experience (p. 110). I have tried hard not to lose my voice and experiences over the years while being challenged by systems from the dominant culture, which have served to silence me through even the subtlest of forms. In keeping my voice and spirit as one, I am passing on my knowledge and my children grow because of this. Galeano (1992) writes about his learning of history and his own self-reflection. Galeano’s juxtaposition of his education within the dominant culture made him a terrible history student, in his words, as his learnings came from poetry and literature of his people. As much as it is discouraged to compare oneself to “other people,” I too, found my history through the literature of the writers of Turtle Island, or North America. Galeano (1992) writes:

I was a terrible history student. They taught me history as if it were a visit to a wax museum or to the land of the dead. I was over twenty before I discovered the past was neither quiet nor mute. I discovered it by reading novels by Carpentier and poems by Neruda. ... I am not a historian. I am a writer obsessed with remembering the past of America above all, and above all that of Latin America, intimate land condemned to amnesia. (p. 150)

For me, the works of Galeano (1992), Chrystos (1998, 1991), Lorde (1984), Maracle (1996), Solomon (1990), Akiwenzie-Damm (1993, 2000, 2003), Adams (1975, 1995), Gunn-Allen (1996, 1991), Acoose (1995), Silko (1993), Forbes (1992), hooks (1994), and Harjo (1998) have contributed greatly to my understanding of the colonial past, and are also my way of remembering.

### **Arts-based Research as a Foundation to Learn**

Because I spent some time away from academia, understanding how my position and identity shaped my research is foundational to my arts-based research. Here, in the moment of conducting thesis research, is where I situate myself in this visual essay. This research is tied to my mothering and my lived experiences as an Indigenous, and specifically Anishinaabe woman and mother. I see my mothering as a part of nation building, and directly linked to the Land. This arts-based presentation with my stories overlaid on my photographs, furthered my self-reflection and understanding of my role as an artist, storyteller, mother, and researcher. Wilson (2001) captures the essence of being as centred in the land for Indigenous people, and that “Indigenous sense of self is planted and rooted in the land” (p. 91). I understand this essence of being very deeply, having raised our children in cities and away from our home territory, yet still trying very hard to nourish a relationship with the Land and with the family relationships which are tied to, and integral to good health and the maintenance of indigenous knowledge.

## The Images

The images were taken during two outings with my family over the period of two weekends—in the winter of 2009, and one in the spring of 2010. At this time I had just started graduate school and both our children were under the age of three—one just shy of one, and the other had just turned three. We had just relocated from Calgary in Alberta, Canada, after three years of living there, and my husband was having a difficult time finding work. This was a fragile time in my life with two small children. The stories I share are mine, and are significant as they capture parts of my learning on this journey of motherhood. In my story I share my experience around learning about mothering and drawing upon strength to “live the good life,” or as we say in our Anishinaabe language, “Mino-Bimaadaziwin.” In doing so I marry the methodologies of arts-based research and indigenous research in building a discussion around my lived experiences. Steinhauer (2001) writes that we “must embrace these powerful and living traditions of our ancient ways and realize the strength they continue to give us” (p. 187).

In my work, photography is a tool used to produce knowledge. Knowles and Cole (2008) write about meaning making through art, and how we build upon our artwork to generate discourse. They write about how “powerful visual statements may serve as provocative political and rhetorical devices; however, if any artistic appeal is to go beyond iconic status, it requires profound theoretical and interdisciplinary support to back it up” (p. 247). Images can convey alternate meanings where words are limited, and can delve into the context of the creator’s life. Photos connect us to the past and inform our worldviews, and inform us with the stories attached. Sullivan (2008) writes about arts research in which

[t]he artist is not only embodied in the making of images and objects, but these artworks exist within a wider space of critical discourse that is partly directed by the scope of the research project, and partly by the field at large. (p. 242)

For me the act of reciprocity is an important aspect of making art. I see my work as my way of giving to my community for the sup-

port they have given me all of these years in my educational pursuits. Reciprocity also reflects a relational worldview and the understanding that we must honour our relationships with other lives. Furthermore, It has a focus on “the web of relationships between humans, animals, plants, natural forces, spirits, and land forms in particular localities, as opposed to discovering particular ‘laws’” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 44). Cited in Hart (2010), Simpson (2000) speaks about [Indigenous] worldview as embodying seven principles. First, knowledge is holistic, cyclic, and dependent upon relationships and connections to living and non-living beings and entities. Second, there are many truths, and these truths are dependent upon individual experiences. Third, everything is alive. Fourth, all things are equal. Fifth, the land is sacred. Sixth, the relationship between people and the spiritual world is important. Seventh, human beings are least important in the world (Hart, 2010). As an Anishinaabe researcher, my story is part of a community, and, therefore, I reveal my understanding of my role as a researcher, my methodology, and my worldview as it shapes my research.

## Becoming a Mother

Before I decided it was time to have children, I dreamt about how remarkably wonderful it would be to become a mother, and to carry life. I waited until my early thirties to have children and then with our first, it seemed to take a little longer than I had anticipated. I seriously started to worry once we neared a year. At this same time my grandmother was close to leaving our physical world to the spirit world. I remember in the hospital room that it was one of my mom’s cousins who said she would bless someone with a baby as a gift—in reference to my grandmother’s passing. A month later, I became pregnant with Julio. I always think of Julio, or Ka Nii Bowit Ozawa Muckwa, Standing Brown Bear as my gift from her. The last days spent with my grandmother were sacred times as she prepared to leave the physical world. I remember having visits from a fox who I believe had to be her helper. My grandmother, Adeline, was a beautiful woman who started off life on her dad’s trapline near Chapleau, Ontario. This is the place her families gathered during hunting season, and from four pounds at birth, she lived to be eighty-three. Our second

baby, born 28 months later, Emerson, Pi-mashi Kinew, Flying Eagle, came quicker. I believe he came to teach me many things about life, especially about *being* as a mom: being resilient, about being hopeful, and that the gift of life can come at times when we need just that, being tender and the subtle skills developed in having two closely spaced children, skills that you could never find in a book. About forgetting the materialistic things we think we need, and how precious life is. And, no matter what, at the end of the day all you care about are these little people who are now a part of your lives. He was born in the heart of the global recession, and bridged together our family because his birth brought me home closer to mine, and to my husband's dad.

### **My Lived Experience as an Anishinaabe Mother**

It became obvious to me that being an Indigenous Mother was a *political* experience after a comment made to me in a Parent Link Centre in Calgary, Alberta, in 2008 which made me reflect on my role, my responsibilities, and who I was as a mother. It was this experience, and the reflective time that ensued, that generated the research question about my lived experience as an Anishinaabe mother. It was late winter and I was with our two year old son who was playing beside me. The foster mother of a young Cree infant sat next to me on the floor. Her foster daughter and my son played together, picking up blocks, and so on. I told her that it would be a challenge, once our new baby was born, and that he was due to come that March. I was just trying to make conversation amongst mothers as we often do. She said "why?" I answered, "Well having two babies will be an adjustment," as our children will be about 28 months apart. As we sat there, she mentioned wanting a newborn the next time a new foster child came to her. I did not respond; after all I was carrying a baby at the time, and one of our teachings in the Anishinaabe culture is to avoid confrontation while pregnant. Later I wondered how she could say that, especially to me, given the fact that I was expecting. Wouldn't

someone like her be inclined to want fewer babies in the child welfare system? And to have a choice about the age of a foster child bothered me greatly. The more I thought about her comment, the more I realized that what she said sheds light on the experiences of Indigenous women and their children. Martin-Hill (2003) captures this in her essay "where she discusses the experience of Native Women in Canada, 'As Indigenous women in this country, we have even lost the basic human right to raise our very own babies!'" (Anderson & Lawrence, p. 117). It been said that today there are more First Nation children in care, than when they were sent to Residential Schools. Anishinabek Nation, Grand Chief John Beaucage has called this the "Millennium Scoop" (CTV News, para. 1).

Figure 1. Bears are significant to Anishinaabe people because they represent courage. Bears also are important to Anishinaabe people because we have shared our territory the longest with our brother, and sister the bear, or 'muk-wa'. The mother bear and her cubs in this photo are from back home.

### **Our Children, Learning with them**

Both of our children were born on Blackfoot Territory, or in Calgary, Alberta. For me, as an Anishnabek woman, this is very far from my home territory. Before we moved to Alberta I had planned out my birthing ceremonies. Smith (1999) writes about the same practice in New Zealand amongst the Maori, which I found to be really interesting as the Anishnaabe do the same, at least according to the traditions I have learned. Smith (1999) writes:

The word for afterbirth is the same as the word for land, whenua. The practice was prohibited as Maori mothers were forced to have their babies in hospitals rather than at home. The policies and hospital practices have now changed and Maori parents have

reinstated the practice of taking the afterbirth and burying it in traditional territory. (p. 149).

A few months before we left for Alberta I was privileged to hear two Cree traditional teachers, Dr. Emily Faries and her husband Bill Constance, talk about the importance of the early years and our role as parents in providing a spiritual foundation for our children. They talked about the burial of the placenta as being an important part in the life of a child because it grounds our children, and it is with these ceremonies where we safeguard our children. Naming is another way we honour our children. These are just two of the important ceremonies Anishinaabe people have historically followed. I knew I wanted to do these things too.

We moved to Alberta at my seventh month of pregnancy. Calgary was in a boom; it was 2006. The greatest thing about Calgary were the wonderful friends I made, and how I learned about *Attachment Parenting*, which seemed to suit us. Mothers in Calgary were so supportive, and I learned a great deal just being around them. My understanding of Attachment Parenting is that this type of parenting supports ways in which parents can bond with their children through the early activities such as breastfeeding and co-sleeping. I found that this really works to promote the bonding with your new little one<sup>1</sup>. At the time I didn't realize the parallels which Attachment Parenting to Indigenous views of parenting. Simpson (2006) tells of her mothering experiences, which provides an understanding of Anishinaabe Mothering. She writes:

Nurtured in those seven years, and including things like

1. The Attachment Parenting website has many strategies and outlines this philosophy, and can be found here: [www.attachmentparenting.org/](http://www.attachmentparenting.org/).

long-term nursing, on cue feeding rather than on-schedule feeding, co-sleeping, baby wearing, and gentle positive non-violent guidance, discussion and empathy. The way we mother is incredibly important, because the way we conduct ourselves as mothers, models for our children how to live as Anishnabeg people. (p. 27).

While completing the research for my question on *My Lived Experiences as an Anishinaabe Mother*, Simpson's words captured what I had been doing all along, but by a different name—Attachment Parenting. These teachings I brought back to Ontario.

Though our Calgary stint lasted only three years, I had regrets leaving the city after the birth of our second son, Emerson. The recession hit our family and my husband lost his job of three years. I also started to feel very homesick, removed from Anishinaabe territory. I have been told we feel more when we have children

because we are now guiding them the world. In order to make sure that my decision to move home with family, with no job for my husband, yet an offer to attend graduate studies, I consulted with a Metis Elder. I had to talk with someone neutral.

Figure 2. "Each step I take brings me closer to where I need to be." (Richmond-Saravia, 2011) Purple is an important colour to my family as well. In the Anishinaabe tradition, colour is important in prayer and ceremony.

She encouraged me to make Calgary work; after all, there always is work and men need to work. She thought maybe because I just had a baby, I wanted to be closer to my mom because of mothering hormones. Her advice was good—she suggested family unifying activities in getting to know our new

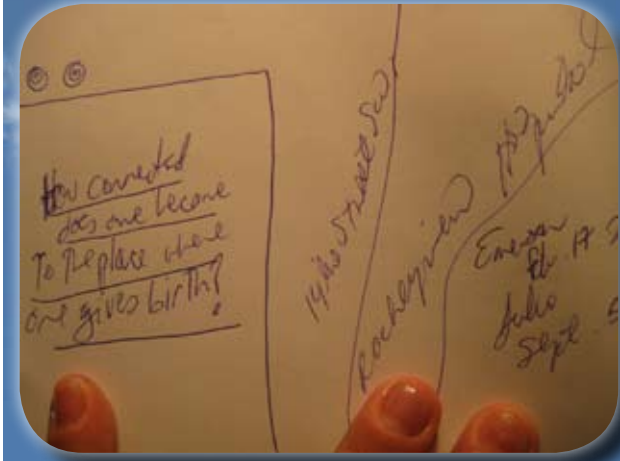


Figure 4. This was a picture of a journal entry I did. I was told to journalize during the writing of the arts-based paper, and one night I came up with the questions which come from deep inside I suppose, which give us direction. I'm not much of a journal writer anymore, but the practice of it is helpful

little one and our two year old. She encouraged simplicity. Her advice was to find a place to be as a family.

Take picnics. Make fires. Celebrate with each other. I couldn't agree more. However, something told me we needed to leave though, so we came back to Ontario. While journaling one night, I

I understood more about myself than ever when I asked myself the question "How connected does one become to the place where we give birth?"

Still to this day I am not sure if this is why I was heartsick for Alberta, or if it was just because of the impact of our move which happened very quickly without me having much time to process things. But asking these questions was just one of those reflective places I was in, or perhaps this carried--this would be the most obvious answer to my feelings.

For months after I moved back I remembered Alberta. It was like having a break up. And I didn't tell anyone. For me, Calgary was home to this important time of my life. The significant stories that started in Alberta bond me with the place—birth, and loss. From my journal entry of 2009, I wrote the following piece

*I couldn't help but to remember the mauve sunsets in the mountains. The winds. The smell of dry earth. The horses. The foot hills that gather like ribbons. The heartache of leaving a place. My dear husband left his home of El Salvador in 1991 because of the civil war that had destroyed his home and community. I often wonder how a person could leave all they love. Is this because they are motivated by love, and the love that will come to them.*

*There was also the baby I lost in Alberta at 11 weeks. This was one of the hardest walls I ever hit. For about three solid months I was heartsick over this loss. No one tells you this will happen though. When you are told you will lose a baby, my doctor, who had experienced several herself gave me a getting prescription for Tylenol 3, which I never did fill. This is the first time I called on the angels for help. What are the three things I would tell a woman who was about to experience the same thing: you will need support, you will need to grieve, and you will be happy again.*

*Talking to a medicine woman helped me because she knew that this was about spirit, and that spirit needs guidance in all times, especially in this story of loss. So the tobacco ties were made, offerings were placed out in the winter snow, and my husband and I did our best. I did a lot of crying. Of course, I cherished my first son as much as I could but when these things happen, grief just happens. Soon spring came, then summer solstice and I found out I was expecting a baby again.*

*And then came beautiful Emerson, three weeks early in the middle of February. Hope in all places I never imagined. (Richmond-Saravia, 2010)*

Figure 4. This cloud has become a guiding photo for my extended family as it represents an angel. One little puff of a cloud which brings beauty to the entire sky.

### Role of the Anishinaabe Mother



Figure 5. The boys are playing in Lake Superior in Pic River First Nation, Ontario, Canada. This photo captures the delight of being with each other.

Children are said to choose their parents in the Anishinabek worldview. It is understood that they pick their parents, and that they gift their parents as such. As a gift from the Creator, Anishinabe children are kept very close to their mom. Mother is said to be the first teacher. The waters that break when a baby is about to be born are symbolic of the gift of the water, and this water represents life. Women are also said to be the guardians of the waters and the spirits of the water. This is our responsibility as women. Because of

our gift to carry children and give birth, we are imbued with the sacred responsibility to take care of the water. Elder Josephine. Mandamin, originally from Wiikemikong First Nation and now living in Thunder Bay, Ontario, is the leader of the Water Walk. Mandamin began the walk in 2003, to raise awareness about water<sup>12</sup>.

My ancestors on my maternal side came from Michicopten, which is along the east side of Lake Superior. About ten years ago a song came to me while I sat near the water. These experiences are part of our

2. See <http://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com>.

how Anishinaabe people understand knowledge. The song speaks about how we receive help from the waters:

*Ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya. We doke we shin, Manitou Nibi. We doke we shin, Manitou Nibi. We doke we shin, Manitou Nibi. We doke we shin Manitou Nibi. Ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya. We doke we shin, Manitou Nibi. Nibi We doke we shin Manitou Nibi. Ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya. We doke we shin, Manitou Nibi, We doke we shin Manitou Nibi Ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya. Ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya, ya we ya we ya we ya. Gezagayin Manitou Nibi, Gezagayin Mainitou Nibi, Gezagayin Manitou Nibi.*  
(Richmond-Saravia, 1999)

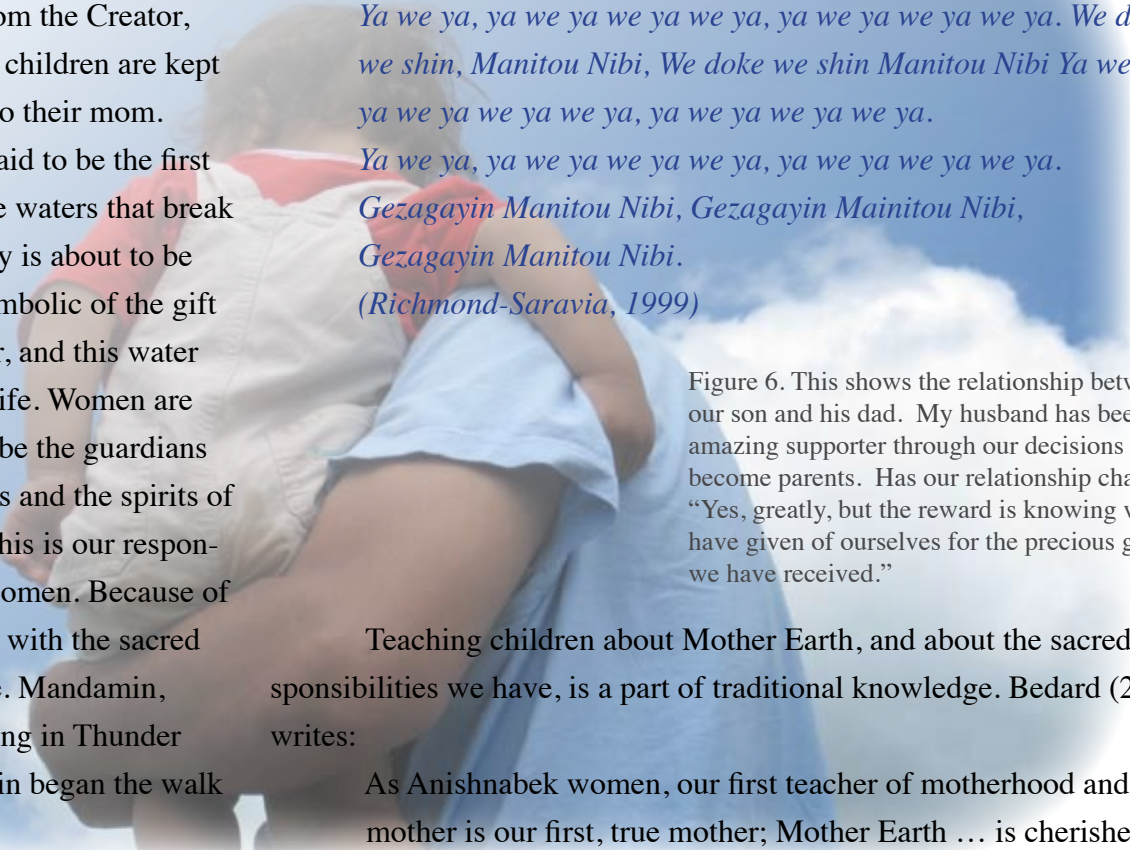


Figure 6. This shows the relationship between our son and his dad. My husband has been an amazing supporter through our decisions to become parents. Has our relationship changed? “Yes, greatly, but the reward is knowing we have given of ourselves for the precious gifts we have received.”

Teaching children about Mother Earth, and about the sacred responsibilities we have, is a part of traditional knowledge. Bedard (2007) writes:

As Anishnabek women, our first teacher of motherhood and mother is our first, true mother; Mother Earth ... is cherished and honored because she sustains us with beauty and nourishment. ... Mother Earth nourishes her children, holds them in her arms. She gives her child a place with her to live, safe and warm. To each



she gives a portion of herself. To each she assigns a place in her home ... A mother gives equally amongst all children. The ideology of motherhood and mothering begins with our first mother, Mother Earth. (p. 73)

The role of the mother in Anishinabek culture does not stop with your own children. We as women participate in nation building by taking on the responsibility of mothering all children. We create nations, and we help to design them with our life partners and extended family. Anishnabek children are seen as a gift from the Creator, and the role of the mother as first teacher is a part of this belief, which begins in the womb. Benton-Banai (2009) talks about how the transmission of knowledge as starting while in the womb which speaks to the significance of fathering, as this captures how a father supports new life:

Before civilization came to our land, every person knew our creation story. Every child heard the creation story while yet in the womb. They learned what their clan was and they heard their clan song because their fathers sang it to them while they were yet in the womb. (Benton-Banai, 2009, para. 1)

### **Nourishment and Bonding**

Breastfeeding is a practice that was not talked about in my family, even though my mother breastfed both my younger sisters. I was born during the Nestlé generation where women were told through

corporations to believe that breastfeeding was a burden and it was much easier to make bottles. The 1970s came down hard on women through companies like Nestlé, which eventually led to boycotts against the company because of the high deaths of infants because of formula feeding, which was directly related to water being used to make the bottles. One deep concern I have for today is how First Nation communities are impacted by formula feeding given the unsafe drinking water in many of the communities to this day in 2011.

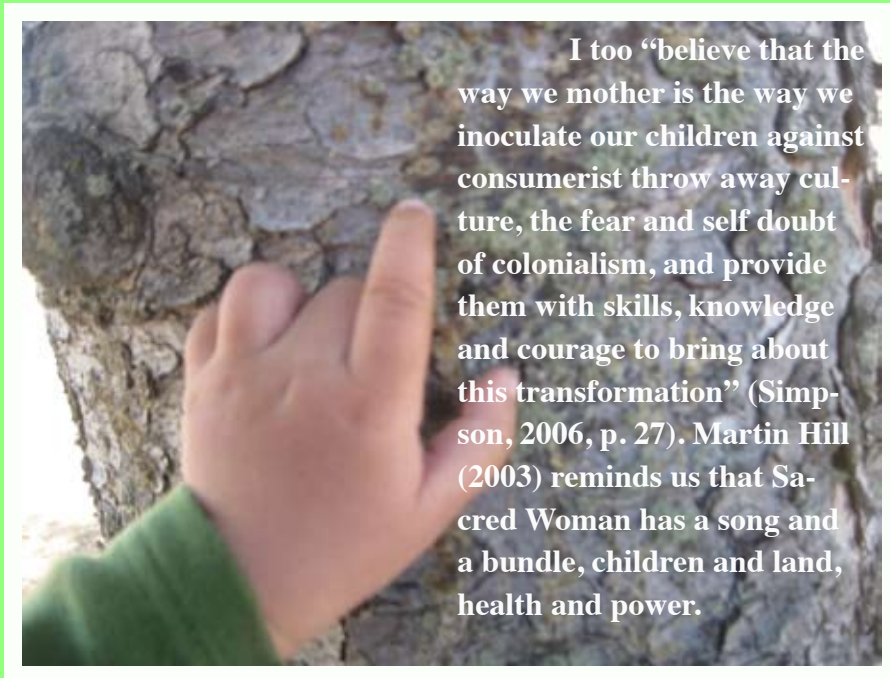
Given this reality, supporting women in breastfeeding is crucial. When

I became a mother this seemed to be the most natural action to take with our first son, but proved to be immensely complicated. With our first, I gave up maybe within a two-week period mostly due to the complicated C-section I had. I felt such guilt that by six weeks I had to figure out a way to get him back on, and was able to completely re-lactate. I have realized we must become our own best advocates. A nurse who inspired me to re-lactate told me “one ounce is like pure gold.” When I first put our



Figure 7. I am nursing our youngest in this photo.

son back on my breast for feeding, those words they became my mantra.



I too “believe that the way we mother is the way we inoculate our children against consumerist throw away culture, the fear and self doubt of colonialism, and provide them with skills, knowledge and courage to bring about this transformation” (Simpson, 2006, p. 27). Martin Hill (2003) reminds us that Sacred Woman has a song and a bundle, children and land, health and power.

Figure 8. Joy-A Wonderful Thing- Our eldest is in the trees, full sun framing him.

It is not always easy but recently, at a coffeehouse, during one of those random moments I actually get to read with a coffee, I learned that when we need the calm, we should call on the Great Mother and that because when we have become a mother, we have it within us to connect with her for calm.

Just holding my little ones close is so important in grounding myself. At another time and place, while “wearing” my son, Thunder Bay, an elderly woman from Mishkeegogaming First Nation who had seen me holding our baby in a wrap told another elderly woman next to her, “that’s the way our old women used to wear their babies.” I felt so

overjoyed knowing that what I was doing was something that the Old Ones remembered. Babywearing is a tradition we need to bring back to our mothers. Carrying helps promote the bond, and holding your baby skin on skin is also important for many reasons—like even after birth it will help bring in your milk. Fathers and other family members can also do skin on skin with the baby to enhance the bond. Another important tradition is the cradleboard or Tikinagan, which keeps our babies warm and secure. So holding our baby close is how we build these sacred bonds, and upon learning these things I started to realize that only in the industrialized world are women carting around their babies in so much plastic.

### *Nügan Izha Waa: Moving Forward*

Like the art I create, I am continually evolving and learning new practices that strengthen my craft. There will be more questions I will always be asking in order to support my journey as a mother. My lived experiences as an Anishinaabe mother will change as my relationship with our little ones as they change and grow, but my philosophy in mothering is grounded in the teachings of my grandmothers and grandfathers. As our children develop their gifts, my role as mom is to build and feed their spirit, and spiritual helpers. I realize my job requires support, rest, love, laughter,



Figure 9. Joy-A Wonderful Thing- Our eldest is in the trees, full sun framing him.

work, and importantly, a community of women and men around my kitchen table, and in my life. Our family is my gift and I am blessed to have these wondrous joyous little ones in my life. As an Anishinaabe woman I am well aware of the gaze that the state can hold on my life and on my mothering. In Cull's article she writes about the stereotypes of Aboriginal mothering and how there needs to be a shift on "the state's continued negligence with respect to providing for one of its most vulnerable groups of citizens: Aboriginal women and their children" (Lavell-Harvard and Courbiere Lavell, p. 153). For me this last photo captures what all children need: a reason to smile.

In the process of taking photos and telling my story, I build a place for voices like mine. I share my story with hopes that other women and writers can find healing in their words and experiences, which is in line with Indigenous methodologies that encourage self-reflection and spiritual sharing.

All my Relations! *Meegwetch! Aho!*

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