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“You Don’t Just Get Over What Has Happened to You”: Story Sharing, Reconciliation, and Grandma’s Journey in the Child Welfare System

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“You Don’t Just Get Over What Has Happened to You”: Story Sharing, Reconciliation, and Grandma’s Journey in the Child Welfare System

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Abstract

This article ‘You Don’t Just Get Over What Has Happened to You’: Story Sharing, Reconciliation, and Grandma’s Journey in the Child Welfare System highlights the memories of the strong Anishinaabekwe, or Indigenous women, in my family circle, most notably my grandmother, mother, aunt, and sister. My maternal grandmother, Marie Brunelle, lived through the child welfare system in the late 1940s and became part of what is known today as the “Sixties Scoop.” This article emphasizes the legacies and the intergenerational impacts of the child welfare system in our family through storytelling. By examining our stories of resilience, healing, and reconciliation, we can understand our family’s history, our displacement from Anishinabeg traditional territory, and the strength and resilience of the women in my family.

I remember we were driving to Honey Harbour, Ontario. My grandmother was driving the Cadillac and my sister, Maya, and I were in the backseat. We were going to Honey Harbour to celebrate the naming ceremony of a family friend. We were bringing food, as we were going to feast once we arrived at our destination. We arrived in Honey Harbour with some time to spare, so Grandma drove us around a little bit. At one point, she turned down a road and stopped in front of a house. “This was my first foster home,” she said matter-of-factly. She showed us where she had lived and talked about how cruel the foster mother was to her. My sister and I didn’t know what to say after Grandma finished sharing this story with us, and so we stayed silent. After a moment or two, Grandma put the Cadillac back into drive and we continued back out on our way.

This is one of my many childhood memories that remind me of the intricate relationship between the child welfare system and the story of my family. Our family’s history in the Georgian Bay area begins with the house we saw in Honey Harbour. Grandma never hid her upbringing from my sister and me. In fact, this history plays such an important role in my life that it became the center of my graduate research.

My work centered on the stories of the women in my family, specifically my grandmother, mother, aunt, and sister. Our stories revealed our relationships to identity, family, and community, as well as the intergenerational impacts of the child welfare system for our family. Importantly, our stories also demonstrated the various ways our family negotiated healing and reconciliation for themselves. The research started by acknowledging and honouring my Grandma's story. I honour her story by not only making it the starting point in considering our family history, but also the framework to understand the experiences of Indigenous youth in the child welfare system. Growing up in various Euro-Canadian foster homes away from Anishinabeg traditions, Grandma did not establish a relationship to the territory, language, or traditions of Anishinabeg at Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. As an adult, she nonetheless anchored her family to the land of southern Georgian Bay and, over many years, began her own journey of (re)connection and healing as an Anishinaabekwe. Indigenous stories carry with them teachings that circle back to time immemorial. Our family's stories, and the teachings they carry, point powerfully to the complicated ways that Anishinaabekwe stories of displacement, resurgence, and healing play out against a backdrop of colonialism and reconciliation.

The story of our family's involvement with the child welfare system begins in 1947. That year, my great grandmother Anne Chaussé ran away and left her children unattended, while my great grandfather John Chaussé was away working as a guide in the bush near Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. My great grandfather's work often took him away from the family home for a few weeks at a time. My great grandmother's absence went unnoted until his return. At that point, my great grandfather, concerned for the wellbeing of his three children - Joseph, Lorraine, and Marie - placed them with different community members. This strategy of community care was not uncommon among Anishinabeg people. Yet, it is also important to remember that my great grandparents lived in a world where traditional roles had already been profoundly disrupted. My great grandfather had no choice but to work for wages and he could not keep his children with him to do so. Further to this, my great grandmother's own history of colonial violence made it difficult for her to stay with her husband and children. My Grandma was placed with a woman named Joyce who lived in Maniwaki, a neighbouring town community of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. Joyce relocated to Montreal, approximately four hours away from Kitigan Zibi. In Montreal, the police apprehended Grandma after they were called to a domestic disturbance between Joyce and her partner. The police placed Grandma into the care of the child welfare system and she was sent to the southern Georgian Bay area, over six hundred kilometers away.

My grandmother's story and our family's history is part of what has become known as the "Sixties Scoop," a term used to describe the period during which Indigenous children were literally being scooped up in high numbers from their homes and communities. Grandma, along with many other Indigenous children, were placed in non-Indigenous homes away from their traditional territories and families. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada found that in some instances, Indigenous children were even adopted out of country (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In fact, as Kenn Richard, Executive Director of Native Child and Family services notes, Indigenous children were being adopted out for profit (Richard, 2016). The mass scooping and adoptions of Indigenous children continued into the 1990's, which some scholars refer to as the "Millennial Scoop" (Sinclair, 2007, p.67). We are beginning to see and hear more about the stories of Indigenous children placed in the care of the child welfare system. In Jackie Traverse's short animated film *Two Scoops*, ladles on wheels resembling shopping carts make their way through the community and into the houses. When they

reappear, they are filled with little Indigenous children, literally scooping them out of their homes and communities (Crossing Communities Art Project & Traverse, 2008). This imagery is powerful, and demonstrates the ways in which Indigenous children were being apprehended at alarmingly high rates.

The impacts and effects of the child welfare system are deeply felt, both in our own family and in the wider Indigenous community. The effects are not only multilayered, but are intergenerational as well. Recently, Maya and I were at an antique store with Grandma. We were marveling at various pieces of furniture, clothing, and dishware. Grandma described what things were and remembered them being used frequently on the farm, her last foster home. At one point, we came across an antique watercolour paint set. She picked it up and grinned, "I had one of these as a little girl." Then, as we kept browsing, she commented, "Sometimes I like remembering, and other times I don't." This is the challenge of stories; they are not always easy to share. Grandma had plenty of difficult experiences in foster homes. As Lee Maracle notes in her recent work, *Memory Serves: Oratories*:

Listening is an emotional, spiritual, and physical act. It takes a huge emotional commitment to listen, to sort, to imagine the intent, to evaluate, to process and to seek the connection to the words offered so that remembering can be fair and just. (2015, p.21)

This explanation of the journey of the sharing and listening to stories reaffirmed the feelings I often had throughout the research process. Maracle explained to me why this process was hard, why writing about it was hard, but also reminded me of the importance of why I was doing this. For Kenn Richard, truth telling is part of reconciliation; hard stories included (Richard, 2016). The stories of Sixties Scoop and Millennial Scoop children, as well as the stories of those who have been adopted out come through in many forms. When I was a little girl, the stories of Grandma's life in foster care often came through as lessons. For many years, I was a difficult child. I fought with Mom and didn't always appreciate the strong circle of family that I had. I remember one instance when we were fighting, I told Mom that I wanted to go live with my Dad. Not long afterwards, I had a phone call from Grandma. Although she listened to why I was upset, she reminded me, "Well, at least you have a mother. I never had a mother growing up." Despite how upset I may have been, Grandma would not allow me to be ungrateful for my family, particularly my relationship with my mother. She shared part of her story with me to make me appreciate the many gifts in my life.

As Grandma says, "you don't just get over what has happened to you." However, as Indigenous people, this is often what we are told to do. When we are told, "it is in the past, move on," we are denying the truth of the intergenerational effects of colonial systems. Although healing and reconciliation with self can happen, it does not mean that we forget. Grandma's assertion that "you just don't get over what has happened to you" reflects this process of healing. As a family, we live with the effects of a system that disrupted Indigenous communities, families, and children. Other families also feel the effects and damages of the child welfare system. As Traverse states, "[m]y children feel the after effects of not having aunties, uncles, cousins, or family" (Crossing Communities Art Project & Traverse, 2008). Our family is lucky to have reestablished connections with Kitigan Zibi. Other adoptees and fostered children have not been so fortunate to make their way back to their communities. Richard Cardinal and Danny Francis are two young Indigenous men who took their own lives while in the care of the child welfare system. Tina Fontaine, a fifteen-year-old Anishinaabekwe, was murdered while in the care of the child welfare system. These youth, as well as their families, have been failed by the child welfare system. As filmmaker Alanis

Obomsawin remarks, "[Richard] never got what he needed most, to go home" (Obomsawin, 1986). These stories, and many others, are the ones we need to hear.

While our family history often demonstrates the ways in which Grandma's child welfare experiences impacted our family, our stories also reflect the strength and resiliency of the Anishinaabekwe in our family. Reconciling with loss, colonialism, and trauma is not easy; it is an ongoing process. However, I learned a great deal about resiliency, strength, and reconciliation through the research process. Earlier in the year, after reading one of the first drafts for my graduate research, Grandma said: "This paper is about us, as a family. You can include this in your paper if you want, but I had a love/hate relationship with my mother" (M. Brunelle, personal communication, February 17, 2016). I had never truly heard Grandma speak about her relationship with Grandma Anne before. Now, Grandma explained to me how she understood her relationship with her mother, one that I have understood as complicated. At one point, she told me about a trip that she had taken a few years back to Curve Lake. She drove with someone who knew Grandma Anne. She remembers:

All of a sudden, he looked over and said 'You've never forgiven your mother.' That really took me by surprise, because I thought I had. But he said, 'You've forgiven her in here [head], but not in here [heart].' I didn't know what to say. And it bothered me, you know? Because I kept thinking about it. I thought I had forgiven my mother for what had happened to me. But maybe I haven't. (M. Brunelle, personal communication, February 17, 2016)

When Grandma told me this story, it was clear to see the impact that losing a mother had on her life experiences. I understand now more than ever the strength it takes to put down your burden and to set a new path for yourself. Healing is an important part of a life journey. It does not always come easily, and it can be an on-going process for some people. For Grandmother Shirley O'Connor, "[i]t is necessary to share your experience[s] to be able to find the beauty in yourself and in others" (O'Connor, Monture, & O'Connor, 1989, p.39). Sometimes, healing is understood through storytelling. This was what Grandma and I were doing. As we strengthened our relationship by story sharing, I understood more about the relationships she held with many people and places. In addition, the stories she shared with me also helped me understand my relationship to her. For both Maya and I, Grandma plays a pivotal role in our lives. We grandkids have always had a close and special bond with Grandma. Now, she told me why:

I never wanted my kids or my grandkids to feel unwanted or abandoned the way I felt from the time I was taken to when I arrived at my last foster family. That is why I babysat Maya when your Mom went back to work and you went to school. (M. Brunelle, personal communication, February 17, 2016)

I always assumed that Grandma looked after my sister and me out of necessity. Mom is a single mother, and Grandma lives a few minutes from our house. It made sense that Grandma looked after us to help her out. Stories of grandparents caring and providing primary care for their grandchildren are well documented in Anishinabeg traditions (McNally, 2009). Maya and I are lucky that we spent time with and learned from Grandma in line with these traditional teachings. Some of our fondest memories are of spending time with her. While Grandma certainly took on her role as a grandmother, she had many reasons for wanting to be a part of our lives. What came across the strongest to me in her story were her own childhood experiences. Grandma made the conscious decision to keep us from feeling the same loss that she experienced in her childhood. By taking on the role of teacher, caregiver, and nurturer, she

ensured that we felt loved and wanted. I was humbled to hear about this part of Grandma's life story. I also felt a deep respect for Grandma's story of reconciliation. From this conversation, I gained a deeper appreciation for Grandma's healing journey and the efforts she makes every day to ensure that the cycle has ended.

Art is also an important and powerful way through which we can understand identity, relationships, loss, healing, and reconciliation. Sometimes, art can imitate life. Simply listening to story can be a way of finding ourselves and healing. This has been true for our family. While researching for my graduate work, I read the play *Someday* by Drew Hayden Taylor. This play centers on the experience of a family separated by the Sixties Scoop reuniting again. I phoned my Aunt Jennifer one night and I asked her, "[d]o you remember there was a play once at Sainte-Marie and they interviewed Grandma about it?" "Oh yeah" she replied. "I don't remember what it was called, but I do remember it was in the Sainte-Marie foyer and it was put on by the De-ba-jeh-mu-jig group." I asked "[w]as it called *Someday* by Drew Hayden Taylor?" to which Aunt Jennifer replied "[t]hat's it, that was the play" (J. Brunelle, personal communication, June 18, 2016). When I asked Grandma about the play she said "[i]t was like watching my whole life on the stage" (M. Brunelle, personal communication, June 18, 2016).

It is not only through plays that stories of loss and reconciliation can be examined. Indigenous artists express these themes in the form of film, novels, and art installations. Some of these artists are also family members. Grandma's art form is crafts. She established her own business, and is well known for making moccasins. I am privileged to have her work on my regalia, particularly my beaded moccasins and my leggings. When I visited my Uncle Joe in Kitigan Zibi earlier this summer, I noticed that some of Grandma's moose hair tufting was hanging proudly on his wall. For Grandma, this art not only represents an assertion of her identity as an Anishinaabekwe, but is also a testimony to her strength and resilience insofar as building this kind of identity for herself. It is also her expression of respect for our ancestors.

A powerful story that Mom shared with me about Grandma's moose hair tufting speaks volumes about the connections between art, identity, and healing. As part of her work in the community, Mom sat on the Aboriginal child welfare advisory circle. At the end of her work with this committee, she presented them with a framed sample of Grandma's moose hair tufting. For Mom, this gift represented the essential work that they were doing as a committee, as well as the healing journey Grandma took on for herself, her children, and her grandchildren. For visual artist and fellow adoptee Paul Whittam, his art reflects, "visual healing through colour, shape, and form, as well as storytelling" (CBC, 2015). Grandma's art demonstrates her resistance of colonial systems and the strength to reconnect with herself. As Tara Williamson notes, "art is a method of resistance; art is debwewin, or truth" (Williamson, 2016). However, art is also a way we give to the next generations. Grandma has given Maya and me a great deal over our lives. One of these is the gift of crafting. I remember the first time Grandma showed me how to make a pair of moccasins. She came to see me with the material necessary and sat me down to show me how to measure your foot, how to make the gathers properly, and how to thread your needle with sinew. No matter how many times my gathers fell apart or how long it took me to figure out how to do it, she sat patiently by my side, showing me and reshaping me how to make them. It felt so special that she shared this knowledge with me. As we grew up, Maya and I often assisted Grandma with some of the smaller crafting and beading projects. However, Maya is a much more accomplished artisan than I am. She is very talented at sewing and beading. In fact, Grandma includes some of Maya's artwork alongside her own at craft shows and pow

wows. Grandma's cultivation of Indigenous art, and her passing on of these traditions, powerfully demonstrates relationship building through art.

When I think about my relationship with Grandma, I see the teachings that my family gifted me over the years of my life: a strong sense of identity, deep family relationships, an understanding of community, the importance of cultural tradition, and love. These themes not only find themselves intertwined for research, they are connected because this is how they play out in our lives. The strength and resilience of the women in my family makes it possible for the importance and value of traditional teachings to be passed down, despite the disruptions of the child welfare system. Our family, particularly Grandma, works tirelessly to ensure that the younger generations not only develop a strong Anishinabeg identity, but also feel loved and wanted. Grandma gifted to us grandchildren what she needed when she was growing up.

Grandma's story, and our family's story, is important to understand in its current context. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its final report in late May 2015 on the residential school system, the organization also listed ninety-four recommendations (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Of these numerous recommendations, several include serious and immediate reforms to the child welfare system, as there are staggering numbers of Indigenous children in the care of Child and Family services. In some places, such as Manitoba, there is one Indigenous child a day apprehended by Child and Family Services (Monkman, 2015). For advocate Dr. Cindy Blackstock, "reconciliation means not saying sorry twice" (Blackstock, 2016). Truth telling and learning about these legacies of colonialism is part of the process of healing relationships and reconciliation (Wilson, 2016). Our family's voice contributes to the growing number of Indigenous voices who are sharing their experiences, specifically with the child welfare system. Of course, our stories are not the only ones that are being told. Through the work of strong Indigenous women such as Cindy Blackstock and Raven Sinclair, we see scholarships examining the impacts of the child welfare system on our Indigenous families and communities. Additionally, we find the stories of those who have experienced the child welfare system in memory, film, novels, plays, and visual art. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that we understand the intergenerational impacts of the child welfare system on Indigenous children, families, and communities.

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