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Book Review: BLAIR STONECHILD. The Knowledge Seeker: Embracing Indigenous Spirituality. (2016)

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BLAIR STONECHILD. *The Knowledge Seeker: Embracing Indigenous Spirituality*. University of Regina Press. (2016). 244 pp. $27.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-0-88977-418-6)

With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) final report published in 2015, it sometimes seems as though the entire country is racing to respond to the Calls to Action. Indeed, there is an undeniable energy attached to the movement toward reconciliation in Canada — an energy that demands careful thought regarding its direction. In this regard, Blair Stonechild's book *The Knowledge Seeker: Embracing Indigenous Spirituality* is a timely text that holds crucial lessons for scholars, teachers, and teacher educators in their respective journeys toward reconciliation. Though he is fundamentally concerned with Plains Cree and Saulteaux spiritual philosophy and aims to "contribute to the recovery of Indigenous spirituality" (p. 1), Stonechild makes the broader implications of such spiritual knowledge, particularly for education, clear in the later sections of the text and ultimately succeeds in making links between Indigenous spirituality, healing, and the present movement toward reconciliation, both on a personal and an academic level.

Beginning the text by recounting his own educational journey from Qu'appelle Indian Residential School to McGill University, Stonechild participates in the practice central to Indigenous writing of beginning with one's own story in order to ground the conversation in a particular lived reality. Though Stonechild's writing may be considered abstract later in the text, it is more easily understood through the lens of his own story. The continuation of his story in Chapter 2 as a pioneer of First Nation controlled post-secondary education and as the first instructor hired by the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (later renamed First Nations University) serves as a lived example for the current generation of burgeoning Indigenous scholars, as well as those seeking to "Indigenize" Western educational institutions.

Moving from his personal experience into a focused discussion of Indigenous spiritual philosophy, Stonechild describes the Plains Cree and Saulteaux's perspectives in three areas: the fundamentals of human existence (Chapter 3); the importance of relationships with self, the land, the spirit world, and community (Chapter 4); and the power of traditional spirituality to heal (Chapter 5). Stonechild combines the knowledge of Elders with the academic literature around Indigenous spirituality, particularly the work of Vine Deloria Jr. (1973, 2006). This combination results in one of the most thorough and in-depth discussions of Indigenous spiritual philosophy in print today.

A third distinct, but unmarked, section of this text is devoted to a re-examination of the history of colonization through the lens of the aforementioned spiritual principles. Here Stonechild, in addition to outlining well-known effects of colonization, makes the case that colonization was devastating because of the ways in which it robbed Indigenous people of their spiritual relationships to the terrestrial and supernal worlds. Linked to this contextualization is Chapter 7, in which Stonechild discusses the crises at First Nations University between 2005 and 2011 as an example of the ways historical contact and colonization continue to negatively impact the natural balance of many First Nations communities.

The eighth chapter of Stonechild's text is given to a discussion of the link between Indigenous metaphysical concepts and modern science, with particular emphasis on reincarnation, spirit, consciousness, and near-death experiences. Though these areas are not always seen as "rigourous" to the scientific community at large, Stonechild posits that these concepts "bring credibility to Aboriginal notions of spirit" (p. 176). Readers familiar with Gregory Cajete's work will find this section reminiscent of the concepts involved in Native science (Cajete, 1999, 2000).

In the final chapter of his text, Stonechild discusses the implications of his work for modern post-secondary education. Here, teacher educators interested in Indigenizing the academy and/or curriculum will find important examples and lessons related to how to work for and with Indigenous peoples toward the integration of Indigenous knowledge into post-secondary study. Stonechild's discussion focuses on the inclusion of spirituality in education toward a more holistic curricular experience for students *and* teachers. One specific example provided by Stonechild is the Indian Social Work program at First Nations University, which has used a combination of Indigenous spiritual principles and Western social work theory to train Indigenous social workers. Aboriginal approaches to social work are explained thoroughly elsewhere, particularly in Michael Hart's (2002) work on the matter, and constitute an additional area of research to which this text may prove relevant.

Though Stonechild hints toward a critical analysis of the socioeconomic plight of First Nations people in Canada, authors trained in Western critical theory may find the text lacking in this regard. Likewise, this text may be limited by the fact that many educators today are reluctant to engage with spiritual concepts. For First Nations people, however, spiritual practice is engrained in everything — it is an element of a holistic being. It is, therefore, crucial that teachers, teacher educators, and scholars who work with Indigenous people have some knowledge of Indigenous spiritual philosophy. Toward that end, the readability and relevance of this text make it an ideal choice for introductory courses in Indigenous education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Additionally, scholars interested in the interaction between Indigenous spirituality, the education system, and reconciliation will find this text a stimulating theoretical base for further research.

Canadian post-secondary institutions and teacher training programs are at an unprecedented crossroads. With the "race" to reconcile in full swing, there is enough energy to generate lasting, meaningful change in our education system, change that moves toward healing the damage done by residential schools and toward more holistic and sustainable approaches to life and education. On this journey, however, we must remember to go slow and consider our actions carefully. Evelyn Brockwood, a residential school survivor, asks us to "go slow, we are going too fast, too fast…we have many tears to shed before we even get to the word reconciliation" (TRC, 2015, p. 16). *The Knowledge Seeker* is a living example of what it means to be thoughtful in Indigenous education and for this — among other reasons — it is essential reading for those interested in integrating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum at either the P-12 level or in post-secondary institutions.

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