



DANA CONNOLLY



Understanding Systemic Issues in an Intimate Way

Being a proud Indigenous woman in today's society isn't easy. The world I live in belongs to a country with a European ideology that embraces patriarchy and colonialism. The world I live in is designed to keep the oppressed voiceless and the oppressors in power. The world I live in values profit before human life.

In this loud and hectic world, I have recently found a quiet new space deep within myself that feeds my spirit. This space allows me to love, honour and respect myself. Finally a place of power. A freedom. A light at the end of a dark tunnel. Forgiveness. It's been a long journey, one that I now I have the strength and confidence to share.

When I talk about my history I feel it's important to include my lineage in that narrative. I grew up in the inner city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, born into the 2nd poorest neighbourhood in Canada. My mom's parents come from 'reserved lands', and are survivors of the Indian residential school system and the cultural genocide that came along with it. My dad is a Métis man from Selkirk Manitoba with family directly linked to the Red River Colony Métis Settlement, though he has little or no connection to his Indigenous roots. My mother was born and raised in Winnipeg with a strong connection to my grandma's home community of Swan Lake First Nation. She was the first of generations of children in my family to be raised by her parents

and not the residential school system. My grandma's father was the Chief of Swan Lake in the 70s and his grandfather fought in the Battle of Wounded Knee.

Really, I was born into this fight. Born into resistance.

My family has been deeply affected by colonization, residential school and the loss of our identity. To fill that deep void, we adopted many coping mechanisms such as addictions, unhealthy relationships,

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family violence and gang affiliation, which I was exposed to as a young girl. Seeing my family involved in these types of behaviours normalized them for me. I remember looking up to a family member whom I'd admired, who was in an unhealthy relationship and thinking that showing signs of jealousy was a way to express love. As I grew older, I tended to gravitate to-

wards unhealthy behaviours and ended up in many violent relationships. I distinctly remember feeling guilty for making poor choices. That guilt turned into depression and I began coping by using drugs. I wasn't interested in feeling anything.

My grandma, the matriarch of my family, always showed everyone in our family unconditional love and support. Yes we struggled — but we were also surrounded by strength, resilience and unwavering love and affection. I often spent the weekends with my grandparents which included frequent trips to the Swan Lake First Nation, visiting with family or attending Pow-Wows and ceremonies. I have one specific memory of being a small girl at Long Plains Pow-Wow with my grandma. It was Grand Entry and I didn't want to stand up to honour the veterans, drums, dancers and their regalia. My grandma bent down and gently whispered in my ear “do you hear that drum, my girl? When that drum beats and Grand Entry starts I get a lump in my throat because I am so proud to be Anishinaabe: just look at how beautiful we are.”

As a young woman growing up in the inner city I got caught up in what some might call a risky lifestyle. I was an at-risk Indigenous youth

involved in criminal activity — just another statistic. I didn't value myself and I couldn't understand why I continued making poor life choices. I ended up getting into a relationship with a neighbourhood friend I grew up with. I got pregnant at 17 and had a beautiful baby girl when I was 18. Life was good. She was our sun, moon and stars. We knew we had to do better. It was time to smarten up. My boyfriend and I started to plan our life together.

One night when our daughter was a year and a half my boyfriend went out with some friends. He got into an altercation with some gang members, was shot in the chest, and died that night. Needless to say my life immediately went in a downward spiral. I started to struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. I spent the next three years of my life easing the pain with drugs and alcohol, caught up in the street life.

For most of my 20s I felt guilt, anger and hurt. I was mad at the Creator for punishing me. I was filled with guilt and shame for making bad choices. Often I thought to myself "how did my life get like this?" completely unaware of the multiple systems that were built to oppress and continue to hold people like me down. This was a frightening time for my family as they became increasingly concerned for my health. Now when I reflect on that time in my life I realize that I was in survival mode, doing what I had to do to get through the day.

Growing up, I had watched as my grandma relied on our traditional Anishinaabe way of life when her family struggled. When any of us got really sick or were having a hard time she would take us to see community elders or medicine people who walked the Red Road. Each of those elders carried their own gifts and healing knowledge guided by our ancestors.

The Red Road can mean many different things to different people. To me it means to honour the teachings my ancestors passed down through oral history, always keeping in mind the sacrifices they have made for me to be here. But it also means walking gently on Mother Earth, with balance and love in my heart. Most of all to me it means to live with gratitude, trusting that my ancestors will guide me on my journey.

After giving me time and space to grieve and watching me struggle, my grandma felt it was time to step in. She arranged for a Wiping Away the Tears Ceremony. This is a healing ceremony for people who are

experiencing grief, and is a way for them to let go of the pain they are carrying. This was one of the first steps in my journey to my own cultural reclamation. A whole new world opened up to me. For the first time in my life I had felt that lump in my throat, the pride my grandma had told me about when I was a young girl.

As I started to discover who I was as an Indigenous woman I began to build self-confidence and was eager to continue my journey on the Red Road. I decided that I wanted to go back to school to get an education. I then went on to complete an administration course and was immediately hired at an Indigenous-led culturally based community organization to work with young Indigenous mothers in a pre-employment and life skills training program. As part of my work I delivered Indigenous-identified programs and services that focus on wholeness and wellness and that build on

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This is where I found my passion and drive to work with the grassroots people in the Indigenous community. As I started my career with young mothers I quickly realized that all of my life experiences and trauma were actually an asset in my work. Those personal experiences had taught me empathy and compassion and most importantly helped me to understand the barriers that women I worked with faced on a daily basis.

Working in an Indigenous-led organization has been huge part of my journey to cultural reclamation and self-discovery. As part of the work I do, I have had the opportunity to meet many community elders, attend a variety of ceremonies and gain sacred teachings passed down from my ancestors. I also connected with a Sundance family and pledged to complete four years of the Sundance ceremony and live my life trying my best to follow the Red Road. After I completed my first year of Sundance I was gifted a sacred pipe to help guide my family and keep us grounded.

Now as I reflect on my past I often I think how surreal it is knowing

how far I have come. I know it has everything to do with my connection to my spirituality and my family and friends who love and support me. After everything I had been through, it was my time to give back to the community who gave me so much.

For the past couple of years I have been motivated more than ever to soak in as much knowledge as I possibly can. I recently completed a progressive youth leadership program called Next Up which focuses on social justice issues. When the program started I was seriously nervous and feeling inadequate in a room full of people with academic backgrounds, especially with no university education behind me. I didn't let that stop me; in fact, that was a motivating factor for me to fully commit to the program. I challenged myself to share every aspect of who I was and what I had been through as an Indigenous woman. This was a liberating process for me. I discovered the importance of sharing experiences and how valuable and powerful it can be to the person listening but also how much healing can come for the person sharing.

One of my greatest learnings from the Next Up program was systems analysis. This helped me with understanding systemic issues and also how they had personally affected me, my family and my community. I finally understood why my "choices" weren't actually choices, and that I was born in a highly oppressive society with multiple systems in place to promote assimilation of Indigenous peoples. The odds were against me from the beginning.

With this new awareness I was able to come to a place of power. I am now able to fully understand and empathize with my family's dysfunction. Of all the gifts I have received from the Next Up program the most valuable was the art of self-forgiveness. It was so important for me to acknowledge that I was carrying around years of guilt and shame and to really unpack where it was coming from, and let it all go.

My participation in the Next Up program has challenged me to constantly self-reflect. In one of the sessions I was able to dig deep within and uncover my purpose for activism, which is safety for my daughter, for all Indigenous women and girls. Why is it that my daughter is six times more likely to go missing or get murdered? This was a huge shifting in my consciousness. As I started to discover the injustices in my territory, feelings of rage followed. My challenge is

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

now to harness that rage into action to best support my community.

Being a participant in the Next Up youth leadership program has opened up a whole new world of opportunities for me. I have built an extensive network of leaders and activists I can call on for support in future endeavours. Through my participation in the program I have had several volunteer opportunities and most recently I have been approached by women-serving agencies to join their Boards of Directors. I have also been working at utilizing some of the tools I have collected to develop culturally based workshops to deliver to Indigenous youth in remote northern communities. At this point in my journey I am really excited about my future and looking forward to moving from talk to action.

DANA CONNOLLY is a proud Anishinaabe mother from Treaty One Territory who is passionate about supporting Indigenous women in finding their place of power through cultural reclamation.