

## Healing Through Traditional Language

Sgé:nó Kao:yónt ni gyasóh, ganyáhdeh: nigowejode, Gayogohó:nó<sup>7</sup> niwageshaode. I inquire of your well-being, my name is Kao:yónt and belong to the Turtle Clan of the Cayuga Nation of the Hodinósó:nih (Cayuga word meaning People of the Longhouse). I am fortunate to introduce myself in my traditional language as ten years ago that would have been impossible for me. I am the youngest of 10 children of parents who were in residential schools. Duncan Campbell Scott who was the Head of Department of Indian Affairs from 1913-1932 and whose goal was of “*getting rid of the Indian problem*”... “*to kill the Indian in the child*” (Paul, 2013, p. 2, 14) occurred for my parents in a variety of ways.

“Getting rid of the Indian problem” echoes loudly within me when I experience personal moments of struggle as a result of not knowing my traditional language. Feelings of shame or fear of being judged and rejected wash over me. This is a form of intergenerational trauma—a painful issue I am sure my mother also experienced. It can be very easy to blame or give up learning the language when it becomes difficult: and embarrassment surfaces. I choose not to allow colonization; assimilation and cultural genocide take over who I am. I have learned within my professional and personal experiences that not knowing my language can be a barrier if I choose to see it as one or an opportunity to embrace learning the language.

I have been fortunate enough in my 19 years of working at Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services (GFASS) to witness how important traditional language is within one’s healing. Encouraging one to speak their language or being able to use the traditional language in the counselling process is a healing tool within itself. It is my understanding that everything we need to know as Hodinósó:nih is within our traditional languages. This may involve how to conduct ceremonies or how to maintain ganigoh<sup>7</sup>yo: (good mind). In fact the language loses meaning when translated into English

and there are words where there is no translation. Hence, when one is able to use their traditional language or hear it is like medicine. It heals all elements of their well-being as their true identity is nurtured.

Within this story an experience of how language was profoundly healing during a therapeutic retreat will be the focus. It will also demonstrate how it was necessary to prepare for being the primary facilitator due to the personal triggers that arose for me for not being fluent in Gayogohó:nó (Cayuga) language. This experience was found to be healing for the individual, other retreat participants as well as facilitators.

GFASS offers a therapeutic retreat to individuals who are on their healing journey or who are graduates of the community counselling program. Participants of the retreat enter on a Thursday afternoon and complete the program on Sunday. Many traditional and non-traditional modalities are utilized within this process to assist them regarding a personal challenge within their life. It is not uncommon for intergenerational issues to arise within the retreat. The primary non-traditional tool utilized thus far has been Psychodramatic Bodywork. GFASS staff who is trained in Psychodramatic Bodywork has found this to be an effective healing tool to assist individuals in releasing stored trauma physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The stored trauma has been found to have contributed to physical symptoms which plague the body; have influenced unhealthy relationships; and have maintained false beliefs, of self. All of which is a catalyst to perpetuate cycles of unhealthy lifestyles.

Psychodramatic Bodywork was created by Susan Aaron. Susan has creatively combined facets of psychodrama, sociometry and bodywork to support individuals in healing by expressing their emotions and releasing suppressed energy from one's body through body work. Individuals gain valuable

insight bringing a sense of balance and personal healing into their relationships that have been impacted by the trauma (Aaron, 1996).

At this therapeutic retreat Maggie (not her real name) a lady in her late forties brought the precious gift of being fluent in her traditional language and who also practiced the traditional ceremonies. Although she was not in residential school she had older siblings who were in the Mohawk Institute, better known as the Mush Hole, a residential school in Brantford, Ontario. The Mush Hole opened in 1834 and closed in 1970. The Mush Hole received its name based on the children being fed mush as their primary meal and survivors have shared how at times the mush would be wormy. The word survivor will be respectfully used throughout this paper in reference to those who were in residential schools.

Maggie was the youngest in her family and as a result of her siblings attending the Mush Hole, their relationships were affected. Issues of abandonment and loss surfaced for Maggie as a result of being separated from her siblings. The Qgwehó:weh (original) family promotes siblings to care, love, teach and nurture one another. All of the children are taught to be responsible by means of helping in the home as well as with their siblings. Everyone had their role and responsibility within the family and when children were taken to the residential school, the family was no longer whole. Maggie escaped the direct experience of the Mush Hole, but she did not escape the traumatic dynamics it created within her family.

Maggie was resourceful and accessed counselling services, as well as traditional medicines, teachings and ceremonies to help explore and heal from the issues impacting her life. This would be my first direct contact with Maggie on her healing journey and instinctively knew she would have a significant impact on the retreat's process. As a primary facilitator it was exciting and I was fully aware of tension in my body. I recognized it as the insecurity that surfaces when I question myself

about my ability to understand or speak Gayogoho:nqhnéha<sup>7</sup>: (Cayuga language). Questions of being good enough to help Maggie surfaced and the old fear was starting to settle in. Inside I was hoping she would want to work with her past Counsellor and not choose me to facilitate her piece of personal work. As a facilitator, recognizing this personal trigger, utilizing the team for support and using grounding techniques to be present, helped to refocus on feeling confident in the skills I brought to the retreat. This was a valuable lesson as a Counsellor in addressing the personal trigger as it allowed me to not to place my insecurities/fears onto Maggie.

Unsurprisingly, Maggie chose me to facilitate her personal healing piece within the Psychodramatic Bodywork process. Maggie was prepared and brought the traditional medicines she needed for the healing work she was about to step into. Maggie began using English as she started her drama and she struggled to express what she really needed to say due to the loss in translation. Relying on instinct it was recognized Maggie was using English for our benefit. I directed Maggie to use Gayogoho:nqhnéha<sup>7</sup>: within her drama as this was about her healing process. Maggie appeared relieved and quickly moved into speaking throughout her drama.

Paying close attention to her body language, facial expressions, voice tone and using my limited knowledge of Gayogohó:nq assisted Maggie's healing process. These cues allowed for facilitating her cathartic (emotional) releases and role reversals which allowed Maggie to mend issues impacting familial relationships. Most importantly she expressed herself from her spiritual base as Hodiŋsó:nih. The people she chose as her helpers within her drama did not require knowing the language when in role. They trusted their instincts in role and Maggie would translate the most important messages for them to repeat back. Translating did not remove her from her healing experience as it was built into the drama as part of the losses she experienced from having loved ones in the Mush Hole.



Maggie completed her drama and used the medicine she had prepared to cleanse herself from any emotional and spiritual residue remaining. All the participants acknowledged Maggie for the vicarious healing they received from witnessing and participating in her drama. Most of the comments were in relation to healing levels of their oppression crediting Gayogohó:nq̓hnéha<sup>7</sup>: as the primary source. Maggie identified experiencing a powerful shift in the process once she began speaking Gayogohó:nq̓, which allowed her to speak her truth. Maggie clarified the translating did not deter her from her healing. She stated speaking in the language removed any barriers to communicate truthfully.

Maggie was influential in strengthening my confidence in working with survivors of residential schools by humbly accepting my limitations and embracing what I offer. I could have easily guided the drama in English to suit my personal comfort rationalizing it was to help other participants. However, I chose to honour Maggie's needs. I did not participate or perpetuate in "getting rid of the Indian problem" by forbidding her to speak Gayogohó:nq̓. Witnessing the healing power of the traditional language invoked within me and others a spiritual connection. I was grateful in having Maggie strengthen the teaching that everything we need to thrive is within our language. Nya:wq̓h (acknowledge) to Maggie for her ability to speak Gayogohó:nq̓ as it lifted a layer of oppression and provided healing for everyone.

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## References

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*Traditional Hodinósq:nih Teachings* (personal communications reflective of lived experiences).

