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Towards an Anishinabe Research Paradigm: Theory and Practice.

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<CH HEAD>Chapter 14

<CH TITLE>Toward an Anishinaabe Research Paradigm: Theory and Practice

Deborah McGregor

<A>Introduction

As this volume attests to, in recent years there has been a remarkable emergence of Indigenous research scholarship both internationally and within Canada. Indigenous theory, paradigms, and methods inform research practices which take on many forms, reflecting the diversity of Indigenous nations. Many scholars, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, have sought to decolonize past and current research approaches and advance Indigenous approaches and methods of research (Louis, 2007). Some more recent efforts have focused specifically on the revitalization of Indigenous research traditions (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2003; Wilson, 2008). Anishinaabe research is a form of reclaiming our stories and knowledge through personal transformation while in the pursuit of knowledge. As Anishinaabe people, we have our own worldviews, philosophies, ways of being, and research traditions that account for our relationships and existence in the world. This volume represents the diversity of ways in which Anishinaabek are tackling the challenging, yet transformative, work involved in re-creating our knowledge on our own terms.

A more detailed description of the literature on Indigenous research is contained in the introduction to this volume. In this paper I offer a more specific look at Anishinaabe theoretical frameworks and practices as they are being utilized in a research project entitled “Traditional Knowledge, Aboriginal Peoples and Water Governance in Ontario,” of which I am the principal

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investigator. Fundamentally, the approach taken in this research reflects Anishinaabe relationships to the environment (Kovach, 2003; Wilson, 2008). A “knowledge sharing” paradigm is utilized, in which researchers seek to share and learn knowledge, rather than merely extract it. The research reflects the holistic worldview of the Anishinaabe in which the economic, social, cultural, spiritual, ecological, legal, and political aspects of life are viewed, experienced, and explained as part of a whole.

For example, “storywork” (research as storytelling), a traditional form of engaging in dialogue and learning relationships with Elders as described by Archibald (2008), is currently being utilized in this research. “Theories,” as they are seen through the eyes of science, do exist in Anishinaabe knowledge systems, and are contained in stories, teachings, values, beliefs, ceremonies, songs, dances, and other practices (McGregor, 2013). Research can thus be thought of as a story, and our experiences form a part of that story about our relationships with each other, with other beings, and with the earth/Creation. We are seeking knowledge that is already there, so we may tell or retell a story that often already exists, although, as Wendy Geniusz (2009), in her work *Our Knowledge is Not Primitive: Decolonizing Botanical Anishinaabe Teachings*, points out, the source must still be acknowledged. From this standpoint, we are all part of that grand story that unfolds over time and facilitates our growth and transformation. Anishinaabe research traditions also focus on the ethical conduct required to ensure appropriate relationships with all of Creation. Proper relationships are required among all beings to ensure sustainability, not just for people, but for all of Creation. The Anishinaabe researcher’s preoccupation is to learn to engage appropriately in a series of relationships with other beings in Creation to serve our nations now and into the future.

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I will draw upon my own professional and personal experience as an academic and community-based researcher, where I have had to continually mediate between two (or more) different intellectual traditions over the past three decades. Many of the other contributors to this volume describe how they have managed similar challenges. As an Anishinaabe scholar, it has been an important goal of my professional life to engage in research relationships and initiatives that assist our communities in achieving *Minobimaatisiwin* (LaDuke, 1999), that “good life,” or the goals they define as requiring attention. Anishinaabe research is not just concerned with the revitalization and utilization of research traditions, but also with why we engage in these practices in the first place.

In this paper will touch on four key areas that frame an Anishinaabe research process: the role of familial and community knowledge in research; the role of service in research; bridging personal, academic, and community-based practice while engaged in the research process itself; and knowledge mobilization. Prior to beginning, however, I will expand upon the idea of research as storytelling.

<A>Situating Oneself as the Researcher/Storyteller

I regard research as a form of storytelling. As a researcher, sharing findings or research results often takes the form of story, whether in an oral or written presentation – Georgina Martin and Nicole Penak have both illustrated this in their chapters in this volume. Our story as researchers begins with the source(s) of our knowledge, not only those direct sources which contribute to a current project, but also those individuals and life experiences that along the way have shaped who we are. In other words, it is vital that a researcher acknowledge and explain his or her perspective on the research. Wendy Makoons Geniusz (2009) states that we “must always

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introduce the source of one's teachings" (p. xi) in order to "explain who I am, to whom I am connected and where I come from" (p. xv). Geniusz explains that acknowledging the source of knowledge and how we came to know it is essential to Anishinaabe research practice. Often familial and community sources of knowledge go unacknowledged in our professional lives as they are taken for granted or not considered "academic." Anishinaabe ethical research protocol requires that respect be given to those who have shaped and contributed to our knowledge. Whether we care to admit it or not, community, familial, and personal knowledge greatly influence the approach that we take to research. For the Anishinabeg, cultural protocols require us to acknowledge our personal knowledge sources, just as we would cite sources from the scholarly literature.

From these personal sources of knowledge, we learn about our relationships, not only to each other, but to other beings and to Creation itself. We remind ourselves of our responsibilities, of our duties, of how we are accountable (because we are held accountable on multiple levels), and of the moral and ethical conduct required to ensure that relationships are maintained. The scope for Indigenous research is broad: it is fundamentally about our relationships, to our research topic and to the people we wish to work with, but it is also tied to our responsibilities to Creation. Over the past decades a number of scholars have articulated these very same notions as research principles. For example, Shawn Wilson (2001), Cree scholar, observes that:

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An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, not just with research subjects I may be working with, but is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the

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cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. (Wilson, 2001, p. 177)

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An Indigenous conceptual framework views relationships, not only to what we see around us, but to all that has come before (our ancestors) and to all that comes after (those yet to be born, along with the world we leave them), as the *theory* or explanation for *why we do what we do and how we do it*. Ethically, we work to recognize and *live* these relationships. In an Indigenous research paradigm, our ethics or conduct always includes the environment (or all of Creation), as well as the spirit world, no matter what the research questions or topic. In Anishinaabe research paradigms, our original sources of information are our ancestors, who were real people living their everyday lives, as well as the places that we come from. Geniusz (2009) refers to this view of research as *biskaabiiyang*, or “returning to ourselves” (p. 9).

I have taken the concept of *biskaabiiyang* to heart in this paper and have thus chosen to share, in the brief words that follow, the personal sources of my knowledge and the places from which my knowledge is derived. I recognize my approach will transform over time as I enter different life stages, but the following is an expression of where I am currently.

My story begins with my family and community. I am Anishinaabe from Wiigwaaskinga (Birch Island, Ontario, the community at the heart of the Whitefish River First Nation), where I grew up surrounded by a large extended family, including many cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. My mother, Marion, is from Wikwemikong, a large First Nation on the eastern shores of Manitoulin Island, Ontario. At age eight, she was taken to residential school in

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Spanish, Ontario. She retained her language and for 30 years was a schoolteacher and principal at Shawanosowe, the community school in Birch Island named after a powerful and spiritual Anishinaabe leader. My father, Murray, grew up in Wiigwaaskinga, the youngest of 12 children, and attended public school in a nearby town. His educational experience “in town” was not any better than my mother’s in residential school, yet he also retained his language.

I come from a family of leaders. Both my parents served on Band Council and have been involved in First Nation politics for some time. My paternal grandfather, William McGregor, was Chief of Whitefish River First Nation for many years. My great-grandfather on my mother’s side, Sam Beaucage, “knew medicine.” My grandmothers, Annie Beaucage and Julie McGregor, were tireless workers, raising families while highly involved in community building; they both valued education highly. My grandparents, great-grandparents, and other ancestors on both sides of my family all flourished within Anishinaabe worldview, yet at the same time learned the language and practices of the dominant worldview, largely through varying degrees of formal education and participation in the wage economy, but mostly through religion (Christianity).

On the maternal side of my family, I come from the Mukwah (Bear) Clan, and according to the late Elder Lillian McGregor, on my father’s side the Ahjjjawk (Crane) Clan. There are many lessons I learned from simply growing up in this family, including the way my family and ancestors lived their lives. For example, I learned that you can still be Anishinaabe, yet learn other ways of being as well. Thus, long before I read anything about Indigenous research methods as a scholar, I was learning its central principles, ethics, and values informally from my family, community, and nation.

I am also a mother and, with my partner, am raising two Anishinaabe children in an urban context. In my community of Birch Island, we can still hunt, fish, gather medicines, and

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gather/pick berries. Every spring, my family opens and runs the “sugar camp.” I grew up spending many long days in the bush, listening to stories, gathering sap, chopping wood, running in the woods. Though they currently spend much of their lives in the city, my children, during our frequent trips “up north,” can still do these things with their cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Spending many hours at sugar camp facilitates important community and family relationships. It allows one to *just be*: to eat, work, listen, and tell stories.

In addition to relationships, it is such *places* that shape who we are and what we know, and thus our research processes. I am very fortunate that I have *place* in my life. My community is caretaker for a very sacred location, *Dreamer’s Rock*. Many Anishinaabe and other nations continue to come here for spiritual and ceremonial purposes. Numerous community events and the annual traditional pow-wow are held in this place. Cree scholar Margaret Kovach (2009) discusses the importance of place for framing Indigenous research approaches, stating that “[t]he visitation of anecdotes, metaphors, and stories about place make cerebral, academic language accessible and reflect holistic epistemologies” (p. 60). Fundamentally, stories about place, about our relationships to the environment, land, and ancestors, bring deeper meaning and understanding to the research.

Before proceeding with the rest of the chapter, I should note that in the decades of research activities I have engaged in, there are many others I have learned from as well. Two people stand out who have influenced me greatly. One is Ma Chi Biness, Robin Green, an Elder who has since passed on to the spirit world, with whom I had the privilege of working both at the Chiefs of Ontario and at the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources, in Winnipeg. I have also had the privilege of working with Grandmother Beedawsige, Josephine Mandamin, founder of the *Mother Earth Water Walk*. I have learned much from these two magnificent teachers, not just in

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terms of knowledge itself, but also how to share knowledge with humility and kindness. While I cannot share here all I have learned from these two remarkable individuals, readers can refer to other writings where I share more specific insights (e.g., McGregor, 2004; McGregor, 2012a).

Recently, I remarked to a group of students that some of my most significant “a-ha” moments about Indigenous research have come through my engagement with family, community, nation, Elders, and traditional knowledge holders. Our personal sources, including places and teachers, as well as the idea of “returning to oneself,” thus all form integral aspects of an Anishinaabe research paradigm (Geniusz, 2009).

<A>The Role of Service: Taking Direction from Elders and from Traditional Knowledge Holders and Practitioners

There are a growing number of Indigenous scholars, including many who have contributed to this volume, who bring their community ties, responsibilities, obligations, and networks to bear on their scholarly work. Many Indigenous scholars volunteer or work with Aboriginal communities and organizations. Such service links the academy and Aboriginal communities in novel ways. In this section I will highlight how the “Traditional Knowledge, Aboriginal Peoples and Water Governance in Ontario” project emerged from working with First Nations on endeavours that later transformed into an “academic” research project.

In 2000, seven people died from *E. coli* contamination of the drinking water supply in the rural town of Walkerton, Ontario. An inquiry was held into the tragedy and two years later, Justice O’Connor released his report on Part 2 of the Walkerton Inquiry, outlining 121 recommendations. Key among these was the recognition that First Nations face serious problems in relation to water quality, and that the difficulty in resolving these issues is compounded by

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jurisdictional issues among federal, provincial, and First Nations governments (O'Connor, 2002). The Chiefs of Ontario was asked to provide a submission to the Walkerton Inquiry. I was asked to conduct the research on the Traditional Knowledge (TK) portion of the submission and answer the question, "What was the role of TK in protecting water?" In this work, I engaged a number of Elders and TK holders in dialogue about the significance of water to First Nations people. The main finding from the work indicated that First Nations people believe TK does and can continue to play a very important role in water governance in Ontario (Kamanga, Kahn, McGregor, Sherry, & Thornton, 2001; McGregor and Whitaker, 2001). This work was expanded upon in later years through work with the Chiefs of Ontario, where the goal was to better understand the role of TK and water protection from TK perspectives (Chiblow & Dorries, 2007; McGregor, 2009). During this time, over one hundred Elders and TK holders and practitioners participated in workshops, sharing circles, conferences, dialogues, and meetings. The main directive from Elders from around the province was to find ways to protect water and define *how* TK should be appropriately and ethically considered in water governance in Ontario. The Elders felt that the best decisions were not being made about water and that TK was needed to do so. The research that followed was based on recommendations given directly from Elders.

Advocacy played a major role in this research with the Chiefs of Ontario. In 2006, Sue Chiblow, my colleague and collaborator, and I presented at the *Expert Panel to Advise on a Regulatory Framework to Ensure Safe Drinking Water in First Nation Communities*. We provided a summary of main observations and advice given by Elders, leaders, and TK practitioners. The *Expert Panel* was a commission convened by the Government of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to advise on the appropriate regulatory framework required to ensure clean water in First Nation communities (AFN, 2007). In 2008, the Chiefs of Ontario

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adopted the *Anishinaabek, Mushkegowuk, and Onkwehonwe Water Declaration*, outlining the responsibilities and duties involved in water governance in Ontario.

The service component of this project took the form of policy research and engagement with, and on behalf of, Elders, TK holders, and political leadership. Whereas research initiated by outside interests tends to benefit those interests specifically, in this case I learned a great deal about conducting research that would support First Nations policy objectives. Because of this service to First Nation communities, I did not have to try to determine First Nation research priorities; I was already working on them.

On a more personal level, the profound teachings I learned from this work completely changed my research focus. As well, they illustrate another component of the role of service in working with First Nations people: that of simply listening to, and taking appropriate direction from, TK holders. It was the fall of 2000, as I was conducting the work for the Chiefs of Ontario's submission to the Walkerton Inquiry, when I met with a remarkable group of Anishinaabe women from Bkejwanong Territory who referred to their group as Akii Kwe, or "women who speak for water." With my husband and children in tow, I met with Akii Kwe, at which time a ceremony, followed by a sharing/teaching circle, was conducted. This "meeting" had been organized by a fellow environmental professional from Walpole Island and I had no idea what to expect. I took my cue from the women, answered questions, and settled in to listen. The women shared their observations and teachings about water in their territory over the years, including their concerns and actions they had taken to protect water. The women shared teachings about water with me, many of which I had never heard before, despite many years of involvement in the TK field.

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In November of 2012, I met again with Akii Kwe about the research I was conducting as part of my work as a researcher at the University of Toronto. They asked me what I had “done” with the teachings they had shared with me over a decade earlier. They were pleased their words had had a profound influence on me personally and on the work I have been involved in over the years aimed at advancing TK and women’s roles in water governance. This respect for the *voice* of individuals and groups such as Akii Kwe plays a key role in effective and mutually beneficial research involving Aboriginal people.

The voice of Aboriginal women has been largely absent in the discourse surrounding water protection in Ontario. Of major concern is the general lack of recognition of the role of women and their knowledge regarding water (McGregor, 2005; McGregor, 2008). There has been in recent years at least some headway made toward correcting this situation. The Anishinabek Nation announced the creation of a Women’s Water Commission aimed in part at providing input to the Ontario government on Great Lakes water issues. It was established in recognition of women’s traditional role along with the need to include women as part of the decision-making processes in formal environmental and resource management (McGregor, 2012b).

Despite the importance of such community-level undertakings to effective Aboriginal research, this type of work tends to receive little if any recognition from established Western institutions. The work I had been engaged in for a decade in the Aboriginal community did not “count” as research in my academic life. This work is not rewarded in scholarly settings. In fact, I have been told more than once that such work is a “waste of time” if it does not lead directly to publication. Such a view seems to me incredibly short-sighted, as, while it may not lead immediately to publication, it certainly can lay the foundation for enriched future opportunities

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and outcomes. In my case, for example, this type of work formed the basis of the “Water Governance” research project, as it enabled me to reconcile my responsibilities as an Anishinaabe person with my responsibilities as an academic and community person. When SSHRC (the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, a major Canadian research funding agency) announced new funding for environmental issues research, I was able to submit a proposal in short order. Through my decade-long service-oriented work with Aboriginal people, I was already involved in working on high-priority environmental issues with First Nations. I had already learned to utilize approaches and methods that were acceptable and appropriate to First Nation communities. I had already worked with Elders and with TK holders and practitioners, and had already received direction and guidance from them around research questions that needed asking. With all these pieces in place at the outset, I was successful in my proposal. However, all the work leading up to its submission went entirely unrecognized. I actually had a colleague who remarked to me, “It must be nice to be able to put together such a collaborative proposal in three weeks.” I replied that the proposal actually took a decade to prepare, as all the service work and relationship building, all the development of trust and my capacity as a researcher, had taken place previously. It was the many years of service and maintaining a connection to First Nation communities and organizations that enabled the research to happen.

<A>Engaging the Personal, Academic, and Community-Based Praxis

The research strategy employed in the “Water Governance” project was intended to engage Anishinaabe research traditions. This required working directly with Elders, TK holders and practitioners, and community leaders to identify challenges and opportunities for engaging TK in

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water governance issues. An important part of the research involved working with Indigenous women to identify how the traditional role of women in speaking for water can be appropriately addressed in water governance in Ontario (in both urban and rural contexts). This research blended my professional responsibilities as an academic researcher (conducting research, training students, sharing knowledge) with my personal responsibilities as an Anishinaabe person (protecting, caring for, and speaking for water). Through this work, I was also able to honour the direction that was given to me over the years from Elders, TK holders, and others.

In order to achieve these things, a shift from conventional research approaches was required. Over the years a consistent message from Elders and others I had worked with was, “We are willing to share knowledge with you, but really we would rather be sharing our knowledge with our own youth, children, and community members.” In recognition of this sentiment, I advocated for “knowledge sharing,” for us to seek to *share* and *learn* knowledge, rather than simply extract it from its original holders. This meant that through the process of learning, knowledge would be generated, transformed, and shared on the Elders’ terms.

An important part of the project was therefore to learn cultural or traditional knowledge through engagement in a learner/teacher relationship with Elders and TK holders and practitioners, an approach that would not only benefit the project but would help to revitalize TK in Anishinaabe communities as well. Traditional knowledge in this paradigm would remain in the community/nation with those who would otherwise have acquired such knowledge according to the methods of our ancestors. To enable this process, I worked with a young Anishinaabe woman, Sylvia Plain (Aamijwnaang First Nation), to enact the story-work process (Archibald, 2008) in an Anishinaabe context. She engaged in learner/teacher relationships with Grandmother Josephine Mandamin in an Anishinaabe immersion camp and canoe journey during the summer

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of 2012. Through the process of learning to build a *ciimaan* (canoe, in Anishinaabemowin), she was able to learn not only traditional knowledge, but also a process for learning and conveying such knowledge in a contemporary context. In this setting, both Grandmother Mandamin and Sylvia Plain were learners, as master canoe builder Wayne Valliere of the Lac du Flambeau Reservation taught a group of approximately 30 people through storytelling, songs, art, and hands-on experience. The teachers and learners shared and learned knowledge as a community, created relationships, and fostered mentorships and apprenticeships. Through this experience, Sylvia engaged in two disparate yet linked processes, connecting the goals of community-based scholarly research (learning about Aboriginal knowledge sharing and transmission) with those of the community (facilitating the passing on of traditional knowledge to Aboriginal community members). In this process, we are learners and teachers in the shared endeavour of *coming to know*. Knowledge sharing did not flow in one direction, but in multiple ways. As a result of this experience, Sylvia and I have given a number of presentations on Anishinaabe research process (in classrooms, at conferences, etc.). Through this project, I myself became a learner, benefiting from both Josephine and Sylvia and the teachings obtained in the canoe journey. In such a process, the line between learner and teacher becomes blurred, as noted by Archibald (2008), because to “share” implies learning, but also teaching. Sharing becomes a form of knowledge mobilization.

<A>Knowledge Mobilization

To meaningfully convey the depth of the knowledge he or she has learned, a learner in Aboriginal culture is encouraged to embody the knowledge – to enact or live out its central principles. It becomes a part of who we are. Research is, in this paradigm, both individual and

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collective. Certainly oral transmission remains an important form of sharing knowledge with others. As with written transmission, the form is important, but personally enacting or living the knowledge is also critical. This is something I have come to realize over the course of my own research: Anishinaabe knowledge must be lived (McGregor, 2004; McGregor, 2009).

During the journey in respect of water that this project has taken me on, I have learned from Aki Kwe, and others like them, that in Anishinaabe culture it is the women who are the voice for water. It is therefore my responsibility as an Anishinaabe woman to engage in this work. Through meeting this responsibility, I engage in what I call “Anishinaabe action research.” Of course, my ancestors have engaged in this work since time immemorial. It is only recently that the scholarly community has recognized this mode of inquiry as “research” at all.

Anishinaabe people have always sought knowledge in systematic ways, engaging in protocols that included the proper ethics and conduct for doing so. This is not new. Knowledge is a gift to share for the well-being of the people and is acknowledged by other Anishinaabe scholars as the pursuit of *Minobimaatisiwin*, or “the good life” (LaDuke, 1999; McGregor, 2013; Peltier, 2013).

Aki Kwe, in their ceremonial and spiritual life, pursue *Minobimaatisiwin* not only for the people but for the waters and all the beings that water nourishes. The walkers that form the growing movement the *Mother Earth Water Walk*, inspired by Grandmother Josephine Mandamin, enable individuals, families, communities, and nations to carry out their responsibilities. On each journey, teachings are shared, ceremonies conducted, and responsibilities enacted. From a scholarly perspective, by living the knowledge, they are sharing and mobilizing said knowledge. Anishinaabe research, in this sense, is not just seeking knowledge, it is the way that we conduct ourselves and relate to other beings in Creation. The

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research that is enacted to pursue these goals is informed by an “ethic of responsibility.” How we conduct ourselves matters on the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual planes.

Participating in Anishinaabe action research means I have a responsibility to not only learn about water, but also speak for water. As a scholar I enact this through my research projects, as well as my teaching and writing. As a community member I realize this through my policy, governance, and advocacy work with First Nation organizations (McGregor, 2012). As a member of my family, community, and nation, I carry out my responsibilities through my lived experience.

<A>Conclusion

Aboriginal traditional knowledge is part of the lived experience of a person, family, clan, nation, or people, and even of Creation. Making this understanding of traditional knowledge a reality in the academy means that Indigenous people who are part of the academic community (faculty, students, staff, community members) must be able to live their traditional knowledge in this context.

I have, in the course of this chapter, aimed to provide some insight into what this means from a personal and a professional perspective. For this is the challenge of the Aboriginal researcher in the 21st century: to be able to integrate our personal (in my case, Anishinaabe) understandings of the world, with our professional and academic endeavours. Our research undertakings must reflect our understanding of Aboriginal ethics and worldview. Bringing these pieces of the puzzle together will not only help in resolving inner conflicts we may have experienced as we exist in these two formerly disparate spheres, but will also serve to move scientific and humanistic research in a new direction: one in which Aboriginal worldview is seen

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as having equal importance to that of Western science, and where it is hoped new and more sustainable relationships between human society and the rest of Creation can be developed.

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