

OUTSIDE THE BOX: A Metis Perspective

by c.e.chapple

I grew up in a hub of Metis communities and have lived on four First Nations' reserves as an adult, having been engaged to a Haida elder, later married to a Tahltan elder, and becoming an elder myself. I have been asked how much life differs on an indigenous reserve when one is on the spectrum and what things I have learned there that have helped me. The short answers are great and many. The reasons are complex.

In Indigenous communities the first thing that I found helpful is that people know how to *listen* without interrupting, something that is a precious gift when one is on the spectrum. I often find that if someone interrupts me, my train of thought is derailed and I have to repeat the beginning of my idea in order to complete my thoughts. In general conversation on the rez, I found conversing far less stressful because of the respect shown to a speaker. In community meetings, the passing of the Eagle feather simplified matters even more as one is allowed to speak without interruption for as long as the feather is held. I was taught that when one holds the feather it is like taking an oath and the speaker is expected to tell the truth. (The Eagle feather is so highly revered that many indigenous people swear on an Eagle feather rather than the Bible in law courts.)

Another way in which life differs is that the whole community raises the child. If the parents need respite there is an abundance of aunties and grandmothers (they do not have to actually *be* blood relatives, such titles are often honorifics) ready to lend a hand. It is quite common for grandparents to raise young children when the parents are unable to cope. Unlike the dominant culture, children are seldom left with babysitters but are welcome at community events, and people with special needs are far more likely to be included.

As well, Indigenous people are more likely to be visual-kinetic learners. That kind of "show me and then let me try it for myself" kind of learning made it far easier for me to acquire new skills as I am not an auditory learning for a variety of reasons eg. too many other noises, too many distractions.

Thanks to the Elders' willingness to teach by example, I learned how to weave cedar, draw Indigenous art forms, how to jar fish, tend the smokehouse, make dream catchers, create jewellery, collect and dry medicinal herbs, work a log splitter, tend a greenhouse, sew regalia, cook traditional foods and much more. The result? I felt accepted, competent, and valued. My self-esteem was far higher when I lived on reserve and not once did I ever even feel the need to self-identify as having Asperger's.

There are many social issues on reserve as the result of colonisation. The Haida Elders told me of having potlatches, traditional dances, speaking Haida or wearing regalia in secret for many years due to such practises being outlawed. Now that the laws have been changed, they are actively teaching the language and customs in their school and have many events open to everyone in the community irrespective of age, income, or abilities. Each community

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has a community garden and a food bank. During fishing season, salmon are brought to each household. No one goes hungry.

I worked briefly as a teacher's aide in an Anishinaabe fly-in community in Northern Ontario, accessible only by plane or ice road. On that rez, although the language had been preserved, with many Elders speaking only Ojibwe, Cree or Oji-Cree, many traditional customs had been lost, due in large part to residential schools. I was helping with English and teaching about Native culture, showing the students videos of dancing, carving totem poles, and other aspects of life on other reserves. When I brought in my hand drums to show my students, one mother came in to tell me how evil the drums were, that such things were instruments of the Devil. I was saddened by this as that community has been in a state of emergency for a number of years because of the high rate of addictions (eg. Seboxone and gas-sniffing), stemming from loss of culture, limited job opportunities, inadequate housing, and isolation.

Despite the various hurts, the community is trying to heal. No one living there experiences discrimination due to either physical or other disabilities. Every public building has ramps. There are teacher's aides available for every class. Elders are being paired with the youth. Many people are "taken onto the land" where they can learn how to skin animals, preserve food, and much more, all calculated to build self-esteem and pride in who they are. All are welcome.

When I lived on a Tahltan reserve, the band built supportive housing next to the nursing station. The housing was for seniors, and also housed people with FAS, people with alcoholism or other addictions, and people with mobility issues. The reserve had a huge community garden and a greenhouse, both of which I worked in, and I also delivered food to all the Elders in the community and to the people in the supportive housing units. When the salmon were running, fish were delivered to them too. There were many community dinners and everyone was welcome.

The Tahltan held culture camps both in the community and also in their traditional hunting grounds. One year, I was one of only two non-Tahltans flown to Sheslay (the only other way to get there was on horseback over difficult terrain) to attend an Elders' gathering where we were housed in wall-tents, fed traditional foods, taught traditional methods of healing, taught dances, and were told stories that had been passed down through the oral tradition. While there, I helped cook and do dishes, and rode on horseback, helping to break trail to the natural hot springs. Again, I learned new skills, and no one was impatient with me. Other culture camps, closer to the rez, were similarly accepting and wonderful to attend, with the playing of traditional games such as Tug-A-War, the Stick Game and Indian Bingo.

As mentioned, I grew up in a hub of Metis communities, and when I began to have children, two of my children attended an Ojibwe daycare. They had both been identified with ADHD and Oppositional-Defiant Disorder, but unlike other subsequent settings, their diagnoses made no difference to how they fit in at the daycare. You see, the approach to children was not punitive in any way. If a child did the wrong thing they were not punished or berated. One of three things occurred instead.

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Either they were redirected to another activity, they were gently teased for their behaviour in a way that evoked laughter instead of tears, or else a story was told. The stories had lessons for behaviour and were often quite humorous. I was sad when my children could no longer attend as it was a very positive experience, with outings to Pow Wows, and potluck dinners for the whole family where we ate traditional foods.

I now live in Victoria and frequently find it necessary to self-identify as being on the spectrum, overwhelmed as I am by sirens, people shouting on the street, people constantly interrupting each other, and so much more sensory overload. Although both Metis and First Nations' are a large presence here, I miss reserve life, miss the sharing of food, miss the Elders' teachings, miss working in the community gardens, and most of all I miss feeling like everyone else, an accepted member of the community rather than constantly being viewed through the lens of Aspergers'. On the rez, people saw my strengths rather than my weaknesses and I flourished under that non-judgmental community gaze. I am forever grateful for those happy times and for the many creative things that I learned to do while living on First Nations' reserves.

About the Author

I am both a mother and a grandmother, from southwestern Ontario and currently residing in Victoria, B.C I have two degrees, one of which is in Honours English from the University of Western Ontario. I have been writing since I was eight years old, and have had numerous pieces published in anthologies, literary journals, newsletters, newspapers, and online. Writing has kept me sane in a crazy world. I am 65 and was not diagnosed with Asperger's until I was 45, after a lifetime of never fitting in, and suffering from both depression and social anxiety. I am also a multiple survivor of abuse, much of which would not have occurred had I been identified as a child. I am also a status Metis, a member of both BC Metis and the Painted Woodland Metis Tribe of Ontario.

