

MicMac woman struggles to maintain voice & truth

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I am scared. The challenge I face as I begin my studies is, "Will I be able to maintain my voice and truth?" Education imposes a style of thinking and behaving which is foreign to me. Education presents only the white, upper middle-class male bias. What does this mean for minority people attempting to earn their degrees? The question I raise is, "Why, in the face of the difficulties I will most certainly face, do I persevere?"

I hope to focus on some of the problems I have faced in the educational system. I hope to explain what it is like to be MicMac within a system that has traditionally devalued me, both as a MicMac and as a woman. But, will I be able to maintain my voice within such a system? Who I am and what I bring to the school experience is just as valuable and pertinent as what



Graphic from Cayenne

the "others" bring to their educational experience. Yet this has not always been the case.

Education, in general, for minorities has meant exclusion. We are different, less than white people. We are not allowed to forget it. From learning in grade three that we are savages to having racist teachers calling us dumb Indians, we have learned that our experience does not count. Most importantly, for me, I have been separated from myself. I have been separated from my spiritual beliefs which define who I am, A MICMAC WOMAN.

We were called pagans, heathens, godless savages who killed priests who came to save our souls. Learning such

"history" in a Catholic school created much shame in who I am. Yet, we were not godless, we believed in the Creator, and a spiritual way of life which may be different from what the Missionaries thought it should be. Thus, we were seen as having no God, no spiritual place in the world. This feeling that we have no place continues today.

I believe in the cyclical nature of the world. I believe that the sacred circle includes all people. My reality is not the same, on the outside, as the middle-class white students. Spiritually, I believe we are similar, yet my differences show. Cars, degrees and other outside trappings are used by this society to define its members. Thus, I am seen as less than valuable, less than human because I do not have any of those things. I am a single parent, I am MicMac, a student, and a survivor.

I try to live the sacred circle as well as I can. Spiritually, we all are beings protected by the Creator. I accept the fact that I am protected or I could not have come as far as I have come. Education, in the past, has meant the separation of my mind from the spirit. I have denied my voice, in order to please you.

The educational system implies that I must be less than a whole person. With its emphasis on grades and competition, the system has negated my spiritual beliefs. I know that my spiritual beliefs do not allow me to be so competitive. The hierarchical system of school with its emphasis on grades and competition negates my spiritual and cultural perspective.

Yet, this hierarchical system is never questioned. Am I to be a cute little cog in the system or will I be so demoralized by denying my reality, that I will leave school, in disgust? I do not want to give up on myself.

When I was thirteen years old, my eighth grade teacher called me a dumb Indian. Educators misinterpret our silence as stupidity. Our quiet respect for another's truth means being unable to challenge another's argument. In my culture, we do not argue with another's truth. So, in school, I was always quiet. I received good grades but could not speak up in class as well as "the others." The hierarchical system in school already has silenced me because my culture demands that I sit quietly.

I have been caught up in my shame of my Indianess, will I be again disempowered? I have cried in school with fear and anger. I have felt the pain of denying my heritage and spiritual beliefs, both as a child and as an adult.

Within this system, we have learned that those who possess what the dominant society considers valuable will rise to the top of the hierarchy. Those whom the dominant society regard as less than human, will fall to the bottom. Thus, in order to succeed according to the standards set by this system, minorities have had to deny their reality. This is one lesson I have learned well in the educational system. I have learned to internalize the shame and hatred of the dominant society for who I am. They taught me that I am at the bottom. In the past, I have accepted this place.

Who defines what is good and bad in this society? The powerful people define what and who are good—mainly white middle class males.

Defining words, knowledge and others' realities requires tremendous power. I have given up my power in the past. I have allowed others in the system to define my reality and my soul. Never have I had the power to define myself until recently. During my university career, I have had to break down stereotypes professors held concerning my academic abilities. I eventually earned the right to define my area of knowledge, to do relevant research concerning my people as well as to write about what concerned me. I earned the respect of my professors. Yet, still I doubted my abilities. The pain of racism runs deep, the scars still hurt.

Yet, I need my pain to understand where I hurt and what needs to be healed. I need to heal this pain inside of me that contributes to my self-hatred. I need to stop allowing others to define and then devalue who I am. The child within believes she is flawed. It is up to me to teach this inner child the traditional ways of my people and to teach her pride in who she is—a strong MICMAC WOMAN. Only when I have taken care of my child within, only then will I be able to succeed at school. Only I can take the responsibility to heal my pain. It is not your responsibility.

By not owning my pain, the pain of racism, the pain of being devalued by the hierarchy, the shame of being MicMac, I am allowing others the power to negate my pain, my reality



Graphic by Rosemary MacAulay

and my self. By not owning my pain, I will fail at school. By waiting for you to fix me by not being being racist, by not buying into the system, by changing the system for me, I am giving up my power.

School is so traditionally male, and competitive. Will those who hold such traditionally male views devalue my voice? Most likely. Yet my inner strength must be nurtured to keep me talking and owning my truth, even if it isn't what you think it should be. My pain will silence me if I make you responsible for it.

The pain which I own is the responsibility of me and my people. Making others aware of it will not take it away, but as the hierarchical system devalues all First Nations people, the pain is collective. Yet, I cannot speak for other MicMac women. I do not feel their pain. I do not speak for the foreign hierarchy. I do not know if they feel pain or not. Exclusion from the educational hierarchy collectively, as First Nations people, creates pain. The question which I must return to is, "Can I maintain my voice within an education system, whose sole purpose is to keep me out? Will I still be me?"

My voice is one of a MicMac woman. I ask the question "Why did I want to study?" For many years, success was a fantasy. I went to a Native conference and realized that my people need education to fight for legitimacy. Yet, education demands an ability to

study large amounts of knowledge and retain it. In addition, I must be able to make sense of this knowledge and apply it to different situations.

How does my voice need nurturing during this process? I must trust that I know what is right for me; I must learn to trust myself; I must be able to stand up for my beliefs, and to trust my spirit. Yet, today, I sometimes still feel excluded even from myself. The fear survives in me today. Coupled with that fear is the will to succeed and to earn my degree.

I do not want to lose my voice, which has taken years to develop, and which still needs nurturing. I have survived high school. Despite my immersion within this hierarchy, I have still been strong. One major problem with education has been the hope that if all us Indians got educated, we would all turn into nice white people. So far, this has not happened. Instead, I have gained more pride within myself for who I am, despite the fear and the shame I have carried for all of these years. Earning a degree will not turn me into a nice, upper middle-class white woman. Instead I will become a stronger MicMac woman who can finally do constructive things for her People. I will not stop being MicMac. We, as a People, will not disappear. We are not turning into anything except MicMacs with a sense of pride.

Education will not take away my First Nations spirit. I feel strongly that in order for my voice to be empowered, I must cling to my spiritual beliefs. I will not find that support in school but within my community. Education will not force me to maintain the status quo but to challenge it. My experience outside the status quo needs to be heard.

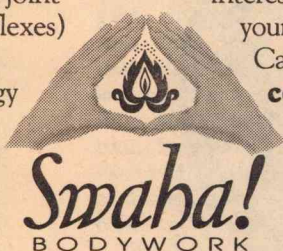
I have tried to share my feelings as I begin a new school year. My need to maintain my voice will increase as the year progresses, as it becomes easier to sit and be quiet and just get by. Because of my race and gender, I am doubly excluded. I need to trust my inner feelings. I must not separate school from my spirit. I must nurture my strength and find the confidence to stand up for myself with professors and other students. I am afraid. Yet there is no courage without fear, no growth without pain. A positive attitude must be maintained as well.

The women of my people have always been strong. It is up to me to maintain that strength. The psychological intimidation of racism, hierarchy and sexism will not defeat me. The essence of education, for me, is to survive intact. My heritage demands it.

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