

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network and Ryerson Aboriginal Student Services, in partnership with the Ryerson Student's Union, Ryerson White Ribbon Campaign, and Ryerson Discrimination and Harassment Prevention Services are proud to present:

Protecting the Circle

Aboriginal Men Ending Violence Against Women

Ryerson Student Campus Centre Toronto

January 11th, 2010



A written collection of submitted works by Aboriginal men

Woman – by Walter Woodman

Strength is something all men want
to shed tears or have fears
is something we taunt.
To show force against mothers, sisters, girlfriends
isn't something you do
as REAL men.
To be humble yet strong role model to others
to not only see women as things
but all of them mothers.
For without them where would we be?
no mother earth, no mothers womb
no mother you, mother me.
A woman has given you life as a gift
so respect her, cherish her
so your soul can lift.
A woman is creator
A woman is love
A woman is mother
Mother earth, and the sky above.

“An Irony of Our Time”

Patriarchy’s Precipitation upon our Medicine Wheel – by Robert Animikii Horton

Spoken-word poet Mark Gonzales once put forth that he understands how so many of our women *"have a story that's been told to a maximum of one soul – maybe less."*

I agree with his sentiment entirely.

We are at a time of irony in the legacy of our People, in our history linking to our future, and within our indigenous, First Nation communities. In this time of irony and what I can only describe as an era where too many of our indigenous men have become walking contradictions to the very cultural affinities that we claim to respect, protect, and place our pride within, a step backward and open eyes would suggest to the very contrary when one examines the experiences and realities that too many of our indigenous and First Nation women wake to on a daily basis.

Our women, whose self-evident legacies were respected as our life givers and strength in our communities for so long, are now (in great and significant numbers across Turtle Island) being pulled beneath a contrary and contradictory legacy at the hands of a number of our men. These all too common currents in our river of time are those of reprehensible domestic abuse (from physical, to verbal, and emotional and beyond), to assaults, and to our men stepping into the wake of The Deadbeat Dad. Spousal abuse, rape, and solidifying victimization in the family darken the picture. Running the unfortunate gauntlet of infidelity, driving our women's downward pride as I see too many looking downward as they walk, and hushing their opinions, strength, concerns, and perspectives existent in our communities; one thing is becoming crystal clear:

Too many of our indigenous men are not respecting our women.

Avoiding the conjecture that would forget about our numerous men of character and conviction who adhere to our foundations that respect our women in our communities, as well as fully taking into account that a number of our women have been fortunate not to experience such conduct or experiences in their lifetime; the reality exists that too many of our men have become contradictions walking and subjugating those who is it our responsibility to respect and protect as they claim to respect and protect our teachings where this is central.

Statistics demonstrate, in areas ranging from domestic violence to assault to the alarming rates of single mothers left in the wake of Deadbeat Dads, that we (First Nations) have many cycles to break, a dynamic legacy to create, examples to demonstrate, and many, many of our sisters, daughters, wives, and mothers to empower in alignment with the respect and reverence granted to them as our life-givers in our sacred and timeless teachings. Until then, a sobering contradiction remains to be seen by one of our sisters out there who may feel the cold fists of abuse stemming from a body adorned with a shirt that reads Native Pride; a community meeting where the true strength in our community is hushed out by adopted patriarchy and rigid colonial gender 'norms', and those who strip respect and dignity from our women while rehashing spoken rhetoric about claiming to place personal focus on seven generations forward.

One cannot deny that our communities have inherited histories of multigenerational trauma

pluming forth many of the realities we see. I believe that addressing these contradictions and empowering our teachings to address this lack of respect towards too many of our life-givers will equate to the healing of our communities. To break the legacy of trauma and victimization in communities must begin with the "too-many" of our men breaking likewise cycles in our own conduct. Increasing in the well-being and pride of our women, likewise, will increase in the message they give to their children. Strong women make strong families. Strong families make strong communities. Strong communities will create strong Nations.

The longer our conduct and contradictions are not examined, the longer we placed the fundamental of our culture onto the historical rungs of endangered vulnerability; that is, a disconnect between a sound history and strong future.

I believe; Now is the time for our men to reflect, to examine, and to question our current attitudes, our current actions, and our conduct towards our women. Do these things adhere and align with the fundamental and foundational teachings at the core of who we are, in the character of those that came before, and at the cultural heart of that we claim such "Native Pride"?

I believe; Now is the time to come to terms with the well-being of the relationship we are building between our People and generations to come. This begins with the respect and the value we place on our women, aligned with our traditional teachings. As our women are our children's first teacher and leader; the message, the pride, and the character than our women give to the child is that which will be brought into, and spoken into, the world. This message is one which will speak to all of us, in the future, as well.

And finally, I believe that;

Now is the time to come to the realization, to solidity this awareness, and to separate rhetoric from integrity of what is clearly and logically self-evident.

And that is;

One cannot respect the future, our future, or Seven Generations forward without truly respecting those that make the future, our future, and Seven Generations forward possible; our women.

Robert Animikii Horton
"Bebaamweyaazh"
Rainy River First Nations
Manitou Rapids Anishinaabe
Waabizheshi Dodem

A teaching from Dan Smoke

An unhealthy man is someone who hangs on to his wayward ways of youth. Drinking, violence, machismo, relationship hopping and being a poor role model are some of these ways. They refuse to grow up and walk a man's path-they are still adolescents in a man's body. These "boys" certainly don't learn from their mistakes as men. To the contrary, they will blame others for their poor behaviour. They become psychologically and morally stuck and are fearful of change and growth. These men are particularly afraid of strong women. They will deliberately seek out a woman who they can control and not a true partner. Intimacy will be too scary for them.

On the other hand, an imperfect healthy man will grow up from his wayward ways. He will stop unhealthy behavior that brought him thrills, shame and confusion as a young man. This man will know that the way of the warrior is to be responsible, respectful, sober, spiritual and loving. He will cry, say I'm sorry and live life as if his past relatives are always watching. In psychological terms-he will be grounded....grounded to his culture, his family, his spirit helpers and most importantly to himself. In this groundedness, he will know he is imperfect and will not seek perfection. This man though will try to be the best man he can be. He will check in with others and himself to see if his path is a true one. He will look back at the path he has walked and learn from his mistakes and triumphs. Only foolish men or young boys make repeated mistakes. It's in this way a native man becomes whole. He moves from young wanderer to student to teacher to elder. It's all about responsibility and old ways teachings. To embrace this sacred journey is to bring smiles to our grandfathers and grandmothers.

graceful deer floating across fields of green grass

by Louis Esme Cruz (Mi'kmaq/Acadian and Irish)

I consider myself to be a person who lives by decolonial and anti-violence ideals. When I was born, the world around me was constructed in a way that identified the parts between my legs as female and therefore I was raised by my family (mixed Native and Euro), community (multi-racial, lower-working class, suburban) and society (over-culture of canaduh) with most of the expectations that come with being a woman. I learned to do most of the things that women in my family do, which beautifully enough includes fixing and building stuff, as well as useful work such as cooking big meals, cleaning just about anything off of anything, take care of babies, sewing, being emotionally available, responding to men's needs, being a good listener, etc.

Somewhere around puberty, however, both my parents and I realized that there was more to my way of being than just being female and a teenage girl. It was around that time that I remember pulling away from the world as I realized I didn't feel like the girl I was told to be. By the time I was 18, I met transgender, genderqueer and transsexual people who helped me to understand myself to be a many-gendered person who is capable of loving people of many sexes and gender expressions. Today, at 31 years, I mostly understand myself to be a two-spirited man who tries to follow the teachings I have been given around what my responsibilities are in this role.

One of my favourite places when I was growing up was in the kitchen with my Mom, sisters and brother. It was in this room that I developed a strong relationship to my Mother around baking, cooking, storytelling and dancing. Mom taught me the secrets involved in making delicious cookies, cakes, pastries and most importantly, bread. Mom also gave me dancing lessons that involved stories of love, fierce dating and good times with her twin sister from her teenage years growing up in Montreal, Quebec and her summers with her Grandparents in New Brunswick. She taught me how to jive, swing and two-step on the yellowing linoleum floors. In those lessons, she built up my self-esteem when she told me that I was graceful on my feet – which was really helpful to me as I was almost a foot taller than most of my friends between the ages of 10 to 16. At school I was a gender-awkward beast who hated moving my body for fear of ridicule. At home, I was a graceful deer floating across fields of green grass to the Big Bopper, Elvis, Richie Valens and Buddy Holly.

It was also in the kitchen where my sisters, brother and I resisted the hostility of our drunk, Irish father. Oddly, there was a sliding door that we could close while we worked on our homework, fixed dinner and cleaned up. We shared with each other our hatred of this man who we knew so little about but who ran our home with a wily belt, closed fist and sharp tongue. This was the man who I learned masculinity, maleness and manhood from which was always awkward, loud, aggressive, insensitive, hateful. Intertwined with his version of these things was his whiteness (and relevant guilt), his lost mothertongue, his fear of god and his use of alcohol, money and sexual violence to control our family.

Maybe this goes without saying, but I was not too excited to realize that I am a man, seeing as I had a less-than-stellar example to learn from. Also, my dad died when I was 20 years old, which has not allowed me to address him directly with the pain he caused in my life. Without this important role model, I have come to terms with what it means to be a female man. Decidedly, I have chosen not to follow in his footsteps.

I am eternally grateful that the lessons in manhood I have received have come from other Indigenous men. This is something I have had to seek out in my adult life as my family grew up disconnected from our roots in the Maritimes. Indigenous men from all over Turtle Island, the Philippines, Hawaii, North Africa, West Africa and West Asia have taught me that being a man is about treating ourselves with respect, compassion, humility. Indigenous women from these places, as well as from Aotearoa and Australia have taught me about patience, endurance, resilience. Indigenous men, women and two-spirit people have taught me what true love is. These lessons have healed me. They have strengthened my resolve that as Indigenous people, we remember the Original Teachings and Practices and that they can help us find our way home out of the mess that has been the last 500 or so years.

I am proud to be a man who is also female who remembers my homes. I am also extremely lucky to have the ability to love other men as lovers and friends. To me, there is nothing sweeter than the arms of a man as he leans in to steal a kiss, nothing more daring than the cascading hair of a male warrior in high-heels, nothing more radiantly hot than a female man with a thick beard, breasts and small hands.

When we know ourselves to be strong, radiant beings of two-spiritedness, nothing can stop us. The violence of our pasts is not our destiny. We know something bigger, stronger, more whole. As we come to know ourselves, we are natural allies to women in the struggle for decolonial gender liberation. It just makes sense to me – if we stand up for the carriers of knowledge and memory, our mothers and sisters, they will give back that love to us. As we come to know each other, we can hold men in their pain, their loss, their disconnect from their most sacred hearts as they do this work for and by themselves. We are all in this together. We are all in this together. We are all in this together.

STANDING UP! by DJ Danforth, Oneida Nation

Today in far too many of our Aboriginal communities across Canada and the United States, families are being affected by the increasingly higher rates of violence and abuse against women perpetrated by men, leaving people to wonder why men could do such things. Colonization has certainly done its damage to our people, which is not to say that men don't have the ultimate responsibility to make change. When you think about the time that our ancestors had suffered through colonization, it may feel like an eternity ago, but the fact is that colonization still exists to this day.

Colonization comes in many different forms – and one of the clearest examples came in the shape of residential, mission, and boarding schools. Although they were eventually closed (albeit not that long ago), the impact of colonization still remained in the minds of our ancestors, which has had long lasting intergenerational effects. This has led to various types of culture shock when people eventually returned to their home communities because in essence, they were returning to a place that might have still practiced the same traditional way of life they were forced to forget. Coping mechanisms with drugs and alcohol ensued in many instances to try and block out the pain of residential school, but more often than not the drinking and drugging made the memories even more intense. Simultaneously, it led men to use violence, abuse and molestation in the family, just as they had learned in the schools. And the years that followed the closing of residential schools have not been much better for our communities, what with the sixties scoop and the continual removal of First Nations children into state care, land claims not being resolved, and extreme conditions of poverty both on and off reserve.

As men we hold a huge responsibility in helping to end violence against women. It is not solely the responsibility of women to take a stand against violence and abuse; we in fact hold the largest responsibility of all. By working with women and making contributions to eradicate these cycles of abuse, we can move from a place of being reactive to the problem of violence, which is where we are now by only trying to help after the abuse has already occurred. It is critical that we move to a place of being proactive where we can stop it before women have to become the victims and survivors, and this has to start with our children.

Across the board our children are in much need of the traditional teachings about respecting themselves and their partner, beginning with what the meaning of a healthy relationship even is. These teachings are essential because throughout several of our Aboriginal nations women have always been held with the highest honour because of their ability to give life in its many forms, and the leadership roles they possess within our communities. But we need knowledge in action, not simply teachings of the past that we might give an occasional “nod” to. For myself, this applies to the highest degree in my relationship with my partner because at a very young age I received the cultural knowledge of how to treat women and my responsibility as a man to support the women around me. Yet where do other young men get to have this discussion today?

In present day society, it seems there are a lot of men who are confused about how to be a “good man”, because of the ridicule that we receive for wanting to come to a state of equality with women. When we act with any type of respect towards women we still hear comments like “who wears the pants” or “your leash is pretty tight”, but instead of feeling humiliated by these kinds of comments, it's important to look on the other side and listen to what women say about men who believe in equality. For us in the Aboriginal community, it means coming to terms with

the fact that colonization has had a devastating affect to our people – and looking at concrete ways to decolonize now.

Men seeking to get involved to help end this traumatic issue can get involved by doing small everyday things from starting in their own homes talking to their children about violence and abuse or listening to their companion about what they want and their opinion. Speaking up when you see this happening to relatives or people you know is the first step in getting involved to end violence and abuse against women. I have been fortunate enough to have been asked to write for Masc Magazine which is an online magazine in which men can talk about the gendered issues that we face each and every day. It also has a blog in which you can write and get responses from the staff or people who have knowledge on specific topics. I encourage people who want to get involved to visit the website www.mascmag.com and explore the links that are provided on the website. Finally encourage and support one another to stay strong in our stance against this issue, you are not alone and there are people who want the same results, we can go a long way with encouragement and support from the entire community.

It is imperative that we all stand together to protect all of our life givers on this earth, our women, because no matter who we are, without them none of us would even have a life to live. So as a young Oneida man I carry the responsibility and commitment of honouring our life givers in the most respectful way that I know how. With the knowledge that I come from a matriarchal society, I acknowledge that as a man it is my job to respect the strength of women. Each of us must learn to honour the roots of our own culture so that collectively we can have a stronger backing in ending violence and abuse against women. I call upon my brothers and my community as a whole now to stand up as modern day warriors, and protect our women and children and the life they give to each and every one of us every day.