

"Our connection with the Earth is fundamental"

Interview with Kellyann Tekarihwenhá:wi Meloche

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of people who set a good example in our communities. When I was a child, we had to share, we had to look after each other. *Miyupimaatiiiun* means "living well" in the Cree language. The Earth is part of our well-being. We learn at an early age that we are what we eat and drink, and if the Earth isn't healthy, then neither are we.

K.M.: Nature provides us with what we need in all circumstances. Mother Earth nourishes us if we know how to listen. On the land, we feel anchored and that reminds us that we are part of Mother Earth. An individual cannot be whole without this connection. It is essential to the spiritual dimension of the human being. Through teachings, we learn how to live from the Earth. Now, this brings me to a very difficult subject. When Christianity arrived in our communities, it became forbidden to speak our language or practise our traditions. Several generations were sent to residential schools. We were brutally separated from our connection with the Earth and our way of being. Some of the younger generations are now torn because, on the one hand, shame of their culture was violently instilled in their elders yet, on the other hand, their inner fire is telling them: "*You are Indigenous, this is your way of being, these are your teachings and practices*". They see, for example, Latin Americans who are connected to their culture of origin, so they ask themselves: Why not me? Why am I not connected to my teachings, my culture, my history, my language? This disconnection has serious consequences for the health of our people. Health and well-being are first and foremost a question of our connection with the Earth.

S.A.: **How can your peoples' wisdom about the Earth inspire Europeans?**

G.D.: We never harvest too much. We only take what we need. When we have more than we need, we give it to others.

K.M.: This means that we always leave enough plants, because we want them to be there when we return. This applies to all crops: medicines, berries, food, everything. We always ask permission from the plants or animals before harvesting and we make an offering, such as tobacco, as a token of reciprocity. Picking berries, for example, keeps your feet on the ground. It allows you to take time with the Earth, teaches patience and then rewards you with abundance for taking this time.

G.D.: Our connection with the Earth is both fundamental and soothing. It's a type of therapy. If someone is going through a difficult period, it can help to spend some time alone in nature to heal. These lands have helped the survivors of the indigenous residential school system to find a measure of peace despite the horror it caused in our communities. At one point in my community of Waskaganish, we had a lot of problems with young people, with alcohol consumption and that sort of thing. After one particularly violent weekend, we decided to get some elders together. They told us that young people had lost touch with the Earth. They weren't well rooted. So we decided to launch a programme of healing through the Earth, taking the children with us. It was a great success and we called it *Aashumii*², which means "Pass it to me". Knowing how to take care of yourself on the land gives you a sense of security.

KEY POINTS

► *Miyupimaatiiiun* means "living well" in the Cree language¹. For the Indigenous communities of Canada, whose elders have lived in harmony with their ecosystems for hundreds of years, Mother Earth is fundamental to this concept of well-being. Nature is viewed as a nurturing mother: it is a part of humans just as humans, animals and plants are a part of nature.

La Santé en action: How does your First Nation view health and well-being?

Kellyann Tekarihwenhá:wi Meloche: From our point of view, the concept of health and well-being calls for a holistic approach. The medicine wheel is central to our teachings: it refers to the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual balance that we carry in our hearts. It's about our relationships, about our spirit thriving and being anchored in the right place, without negativity or resentment.

George Diamond: We learn from a very young age to be environmentally aware and to follow in the footsteps

K.M.: Knowledge about the healing properties of plants is passed down from generation to generation. It's important to take young people onto the land to share this knowledge.

G.D.: When I look at young people, I see that this connection with the Earth is not as strong as it should be. That's why they really benefit from Earth healing programmes. They need to reconnect with their camp³, their loved ones who are there and their family, which is what the Earth means: all the good things that are there for you.

K.M.: If our camps are not swept away by a disaster, they are passed down through the generations. So when we go back, we reconnect with the time we spent with our elders.

S.A.: What can we do if Mother Earth is sick?

K.M.: Yes... What do we do if Mother Earth is sick? Because she looks after us, we must look after her too. We are abusing our resources and what Mother Earth gives us: that's what's making her sick. Look at all we receive from Mother Earth! We have to give back.

G.D.: What we teach young people is quite different from what mainstream society says. We don't encourage recycling. Instead we reuse everything we can. An abandoned object can still have a use. There are

also a number of development projects in our region, including mining and hydroelectric dams. They may be necessary, but they destroy the environment and leave the Earth sick. They do not take into account the seventh generation principle, which is dear to our tradition⁴.

S.A.: Could public health networks incorporate these approaches into their practice?

K.M.: We need to enable people to learn about their environment and the natural solutions to the problems of our time; we must not limit ourselves to scientific research, but also incorporate our generational knowledge. Public health has a very strong voice in modern medicine. This voice should be used to call for generational lessons to be incorporated. Knowledge is linked to geography and the land. However, one of our elders said that he didn't want to talk to Western medicine users about our traditional medicine, because it would be inappropriate and its resources would be over-exploited. We ask permission to harvest our medicines. We come with a good spirit and we're not looking for profit. In the hands of others, without this relationship to Mother Earth, our traditional medicine might not work.

G.D.: Even traditional food is medicine for us. An elder once said: "The food of the Cree people nourishes not only the body, but also the spirit". It takes a lot of energy to harvest traditional foods. For example, when you lay a fishing net, you need to collect floats. Then you have to collect rocks for the weights, and paddle off to set up your net. Later, you check it and collect all the fish. Next, you come back and have to clean them, prepare them, smoke them, dry them and cook them. Finally, you eat them. So you've used up all that energy to be able to eat your traditional meal.

K.M.: And we usually do it as a family, don't we? We go out together and work together.

G.D.: In the old days, we cooked food over an open fire⁵. So we had to collect our firewood. It was all connected. When we cook our traditional food over an open fire, we usually take a piece of meat that is cooking

and make an offering to the fire. It's a practice that has been handed down to us. Sometimes we acknowledge our deceased loved ones, particularly those who have had a positive influence on us.

S.A.: What final lesson would you share with our readers?

G.D.: Certain words are important to us. We are proud to speak our languages.

K.M.: *Konnikhonrí:io* means "to have a good spirit". Every time we do something or attend a meeting, we start with this simple phrase. If you don't start with that word, then everything is skewed. When we go to get medicine or prepare food, we have to do it with a good spirit; otherwise you're putting negativity into the food you're ingesting. In our language, we also say *Nia:wèn ko:wá*, which expresses gratitude: we start with people, then we go to Mother Earth, the waters, the greenery, the trees. We go from the ground to the Creator.

G.D.: Yes, we really show our gratitude. And I would like to thank the readers of *La Santé en action* for taking the time to learn from our teachings: *Chiniskumitinaw*. ■

Interview by Marie-Jo Ouimet, public health specialist doctor, Quebec National Institute of Public Health (INSPQ).

1. The Cree language is spoken in many parts of Canada, from the Rockies in the west to Labrador in the east. (Editor's note.)

2. Programme details: <http://www.nationnews-archives.ca/article/aashuumiih-2006/>

3. Traditional dwelling on the land. (Editor's note.)

4. Principle which consists of taking into account the long-term repercussions of decisions taken today for descendants seven generations away. (Editor's note.) Online: <https://theseventhgeneration.org/blog-the-seventh-generation-principle/>

5. Fire inside a tipi, not in a fireplace or stove. (Editor's note.)

THE FIRST NATIONS IN CANADA

Along with the Inuit and Métis, the First Nations are the Indigenous peoples of Canada. More than one million people across the country identify as Indigenous, of whom 64% are First Nations. These people represent 50 nations or language groups and 630 communities. The majority (54%) of First Nations people live in urban areas rather than on reserves. Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220921/dq220921a-eng.htm>