

Celebrating National Aboriginal Day in Canada A Tribute to First Nations' Spirituality Behind Bars

by Elizabeth Carmack

Is it possible to bring incompatible institutions, cultures and values together without losing their effectiveness? Can the priority of security in an organisation like Correctional Services of Canada still leave enough room to have it facilitate an Aboriginal Ceremony without destroying the very essence of the ritual? Can the spirituality of First Nations' Peoples be brought alive behind bars? Can the nature and spirit so much at the heart of such ritual practices be celebrated and inspired in prison?

The ritual drumming at the centre of a powwow, none other than the rhythm of the human heart, summons all spirits into being. Whether a song of welcome to the ancestral lodge or reverence to the Spirit of the Eagle within no time at all the external setting is transformed by the very hearts of those gathered to celebrate. Powwows traditionally were and still are intertribal events strengthening peace and friendship between different peoples. Today any powwow honours the Brotherhood of all Aboriginal Peoples on the North American Continent.

As a weekly visitor to a federal corrections institution in the Fraser Valley, this was my first powwow behind bars and I anticipated the difficulties the First Nations' community might have engendering the spirit of such an event. My initial apprehensions were allayed when I spotted two eagles soaring above the institution over a grove of trees, eagles not usually there to welcome me on my regular weekly visits. These sacred totems were a good sign and remained in full view from within the prison throughout the powwow.

I thought the first obstacle would be the rigorous screening at the main gate. With a long queue of people, some carrying traditional costumes, feather head-dresses, and sacred items for ritual use, I feared the worst. However, as the powwow had been organised long in advance by the Aboriginal Liaison Officer, a member of staff employed by Correctional Services of Canada to coordinate First Nations' and Métis' Programs available to inmates, we were welcomed as formal visitors. Good for me, but sadly some of the First Nations' guests had been omitted from the invitation list. Most fortunately the regular routine procedure of ion scanning for illegal substances was omitted, although the formal drug dog search awaited every guest at the visitors' centre as usual. However, the noticeable advantage was that an added test measure had been introduced to secure the dog was searching with real accuracy, a reassuring development for those us who visit regularly. Although a good deterrent, the accuracy of a sniffer dog can only really be validated when verified by evidence. (1) A full body strip-search is a matter of course at border crossings, but not routine procedure during screening of visitors to institutions within Correctional Services of Canada, where drug detection dogs are thought to be infallible.

Once into the prison gym, I was pleased to be met by my friend, who had just finished an Aboriginal High Intensity Family Violence course. The disproportionately higher percentage of First Nations' and Métis' People behind bars in Canada is living evidence of the powerful effect the historical process of cultural genocide has caused. The legacy of violence originally bestowed by colonisation, residential schools and social exclusion lives on perpetuated by a loss of dignity within the indigenous people and a lack of faith in their own culture and beliefs. Just inside the gym I viewed all the gifts neatly laid out, made in reverence of the cultural event, but also in living anticipation of honoured guests to whom they would be given. Hand painted glass mirrors with traditional motifs, hand held hide drums carefully tied with sinew some painted with aboriginal totems, dream catchers representing the web of interconnectedness between the spirit and physical in human life, bead jewellery and leather pouches to wear around one's neck to carry an amulet to protect one's heart, all made by inmates with love and kindness.

On my arrival to the site of the powwow all seemed to be going as planned, but to the eyes of the initiated the sacred act of smudging before the ceremony had been called into question. Not allowed inside the prison gym... Where could the ritual of purification be placed? Cedar, sage, sweet grass and tobacco, a fine mixture of medicinal herbs burned like incense are used in daily ritual to purify the spirit, strengthen the heart and cleanse the mind. Entering a powwow without ritual cleansing would be contrary to the very purpose of the event. How could one hope to summon the spirit without setting a precedent of spiritual wholeness, religious integrity and individual purity? To fulfil the practice of burning sacred herbs, the purification ceremony was placed outdoors at the entrance to the gym.

The drumming and singing began and the Grand Entrance of revered elders, animated dancers and honoured guests officiating over the ceremony proceeded into the gym forming a circle. Two flags placed at the top of the circle in front of the two drum groups marked the beginning of the ceremony. To the uninitiated nothing had changed, but through the grand procession of elders, dancers and guests the place had become sacred. The steady beat of the drum had transported us into the lodge. Was it the physical longhouse lodge, in which potlatch gatherings engender goodwill toward the community? Or was it an ancestral lodge with the presence of the dead bearing down upon the living to invoke a spiritual voice of identity, culture and community? The officiating elder in traditional regalia with beautifully crafted mask as head-dress summoned up the spirit of his people, the Wolf Clan of the Tahltan Tlingit Nation. He explained how his traditional costume had been bestowed in part as gifts from his forebears and that such a legacy meant responsibility on his part to keep the memory of his ancestors alive through celebration of their culture today. That First Nations' and Métis' identity depended on the spirit of their ancestors invoking the spirit of their people today. Thus the metaphysics of the event were consciously communicated and inspired through a reverence for the dead. The lodge, the longhouse, was so clearly in the wolf-man's inner vision, as was his ancestral community a source of inspiration for his dance. We looked on in complete trust entranced, as the elder's wolf dance regenerated a sense of lost identity, family and community.

The feast centred around salmon, a traditional west coast food cooked on the open coals of a barbecue, supplemented with other Native dishes especially prepared for the occasion. Everyone feasted, after which the drumming resumed. The powwow began to draw to a close. In a gesture of gratitude to all who had come to create the spirit of the event, elders, drummers and dancers were presented with gifts. Every guest, even those who had simply come to honour the event or visit a friend had a present bestowed upon them. A small token and reminder that one had been an intrinsic part of a traditional ceremony.

I wondered... Was I the only one who was leaving transformed? What was the spirit of the place? Was it the rhythmic power of the drum? Was it the steady hand and voice of the inmates... honouring the earth and origins of its nature? What transformed their prison into a spiritual lodge? What inner life, spirit or vision transformed their personal isolation into spiritual community? Hand and heart beat, voice and song, drum and incantation, all inhumanity disappeared into a celebration of honour. A source of new life and cultural regeneration, the prison powwow inspired new terms of courage, heart and brotherhood.

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Acknowledgements for the Prison Powwow at Pacific Institution 20 June 2009:

Many thanks to Elder Tony Bob of the Wolf Clan of the Tahltan Tlingit Nation, who inspired a living imagination of his lodge, and Elder Joe Fossella responsible for teaching the basic practices of traditional First Nations' spirituality and culture. Also thanks to the visiting drum group Painted Pony and the inmate drummers who rehearsed many weeks in advance to host the powwow.

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Notes

1. Marks, Amber “Drug Detection Dogs and the Growth of Olfactory Surveillance: Beyond the Rule of Law?” Surveillance and Society: Special Issue on ‘Surveillance and Criminal Justice’ Part 1, 4(3) 2007: 257-271 (<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org>)