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The spirit of Indigenous youth: The resilience and self-determination in connecting to the spirit and ways of knowing

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Abstract

Generations of historical trauma and colonisation continue to oppress Native families and communities today leaving many Native youth in despair. While issues and problems involving Native youth are a priority. It is important to look at those Native youth who try to cultivate hope through agency and activism in promoting awareness and healing of these issues and crisis.

This article is centred in understanding the resiliency and activism of Native youth, by focusing on a Native youth group known as *The Spirit of the Youth*. This group travelled on foot through their ancestral lands (Canada and USA) from 2005-2008, and 2011 and brought awareness regarding the importance of cultural knowledge, language and sovereignty not only for their lives, but for the future of their Peoples.

The study also incorporates a qualitative Indigenous methodology from fourteen Haudenosaunee youth and five parents, as well a quasi-ethnographic methodology by the researcher. The knowledge gained from this research recognises that efforts of decolonising while incorporating Indigenous culture, knowledge and ways of knowing into a cultural praxis that empowers the resilience in Native youth in taking pride of their Native identity and nurturing their well-being through cultural approaches.

Keywords: Native/Indigenous youth, Native youth resilience, culture-based activism; Indigenous identity and wellbeing; Indigenous culture and knowledge.

Acknowledgements. I wholeheartedly want to acknowledge all the young adults, parents, Elders and the adults who shared their journeys with me, and who believed and carried through with this vision of healing, cultural resurgence and social justice for our Haudenosaunee people. This research is dedicated to all our ancestors who lost their lives standing for our people, for those who may still be suffering, and those who stand against the injustices committed against our people, our women and children, and the land. May we continue to find healing in our Onkwehonwe:neha, and continue to move forward in protecting our knowledge and the

natural environment which has always sustained our lives.

I truly believe in the hope of our young people and those generations to come. I trust that if there are opportunities to live and grow within our Haudenosaunee/Onkwehonwe culture, learn and maintain our languages, and continue with our responsibilities to ceremonies and the Creator, we will continue to be proud and sovereign people. For that reason, I dedicate this publication to our youth and to our future generations to come—may you always strive for peace, unity and justice!

Introduction

There are many Native youth[1] across North America incorporating cultural knowledge to bring positive changes to their demoralising living conditions, as well bring awareness to the historical injustices which have impacted their communities over generations. These Native youth have organised and implemented community and culture-based ventures such as the Lakota Youth Seventh Generation Rides (O'Loughlin, 2009), Six Nations Haudenosaunee Spirit of the Youth Working Group Unity Runs, 2004 to 2008 (Spirit of the Youth My Space blog, 2006*)*, and Youth Rallies and Walks across North America such as the *Protecting our Mother - Kenora Anishnaabe Youth Walk to Toronto, 2008 to 2012* (CBC News, 2008); and the *2013 Nishiyuu Walk to Ottawa* (CBC News, 2013). Therefore, this article will examine the agency and resiliency which Onkwehonwe youth possess in taking a stand for Indigenous justice on behalf of their families, communities, future generations, as well as for the future of Mother Earth and the natural environment.

The agency and resiliency of Native youth explored in this article stems from my Ph.D. dissertation research where I worked with a group of Haudenosaunee youth from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Ontario, Canada, also known as the *Spirit of the Youth* (SOY) Working Group. This group of youth undertook a spiritual commitment and a five-year journey on foot known as the Unity Run traveling through Haudenosaunee, as well as other Indigenous communities sharing a message of Indigenous unity, revitalisation of language and culture, and the importance of peace. The research was centered in gaining an understanding of the motivation and impact this cultural journey had on Native youth during their participation with the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run(s) from 2005-2008, and 2011. As a result, the following questions were crafted to understand why Native youth felt it was important to undertake such a journey and what impact this experience had on their lives. The research questions are the following (Freeman, 2015): 1) What are the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs and why do they engage youth? 2) How does participating in the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run(s) impact the identity and well-being of Native youth? 3) Are Unity Runs a form of cultural activism, and what impact does this type of activism have on Native youth?

Over the five-year period in which the youth participated on the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs, the size of the group varied from twenty to three hundred youth pending on the Native communities they travelled and visited during the

[1] First Nations people within Canada generally refer to themselves as Native people or "Indians" when conversing amongst themselves. They also use terms within their language to identify themselves in terms of "citizenship" with their nation, such as Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) or Kenyen'keha (Mohawk Nation), as well as terms such as Onkwehonwe (Real People) or Anishnaabe (Original People) to refer to themselves as the original, Indigenous people of the land/North America.
In this article, I will use the word *Aboriginal* sparingly due to the problems this term has in essentialising (Paradies, 2006; Alfred, 2005) the identity and nations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples under one defined governmental term and structure (Garroutte, 2003; Lawrence, 2010). I prefer to use the following words throughout this document, such as: Indigenous, Native, First Nations, Haudenosaunee, and/or Onkwehonwe.

journey. This article will share the conversations (2011 interviews) of fourteen SOY youth members (3 male and 11 female), who were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-eight at the time they participated on the Unity Runs from 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. In addition, the conversations (2011 interviews) from five adults and/or parents (1 male and 4 female) are also included to provide a supportive perspective of the resilience and agency these young people expressed during these journeys (Freeman, 2015).

Respecting Indigenous Protocols and Indigenous Methodology

As part of this research, it was important for the author to involve and have input from the SOY youth group members regarding this research and its process. This involvement included; attending meetings, receiving feedback through emails and having discussions regarding community protocols, the development of research questions and methodology, as well input to the analysis of the findings and approval of the final document. Once the preliminary research was approved by the SOY working group, the author sought and received ethics approval from the Six Nations Community Ethics Board, as well from Wilfrid Laurier University Ethics Review Board.

The preliminary search for participants was initially done through email, in-person meeting, and private messaging through social media as a way to connect with potential participants. Once participants agreed to learn more about the research, a time and place was agreed upon by the participant and the author for the interview. During the interview, the participants and author engage in a Haudenosaunee protocol known as *visiting*. Visiting is an unspoken respect for the person that one comes to visit and the one who is visiting. When a person wants to engage in any kind of business with another and takes the time to go to person's home, it is important and respectful for the one being visited and the visitor to take time in establishing or reacquainting their relationship. As part of the *visiting* practice, refreshments or a meal are served with casual conversation talking about family and community, and laughter to lighten the mood. From an Indigenous perspective, this protocol provides nourishment to the visited and the visitor by replenishing the body, mind, spirit and relationship through a sense of care, generosity, respect and belonging.

For this research, the author visited with each participant for this study at the participant's home or the author's home, with visiting ranging from 45 minutes to an hour. Pending on the participant, it was either the participant or the author that gently shifted the visiting to discussing the research, consent forms, confidentiality, and then beginning the interview. The interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. After the interview was completed, the author explained to each participant that they could withdraw from the research at any time with no penalties, as well each participant was provided with a list of resources for additional support or counselling, if needed. With the Indigenous protocol of reciprocity, the author personally thanked each participant, and gifted each participant with Indian tobacco tied in cloth, a *thank you* card, and an honorarium of twenty-five dollars (Freeman, 2015).

The interviews were transcribed and cleaned, the research participants had an option to receive their transcripts to review before they were analyzed and all participants signed and consented to either use their real first name or a pseudonym in association with their interviews. Only a couple of research participants were interested in reviewing their transcripts and no corrections were required. The author met with a few SOY members to review and discuss the preliminary findings from the research, it was decided for the author to go forward in analysing the findings and to meet with the SOY when a draft of the dissertation document was completed. Before a final draft of the dissertation went to the author's supervisors and committee members, the author met with SOY members for a final review and approval of the document. Once the dissertation was successfully defended and completed, hard copies of the dissertation were submitted to the Six Nations Community Ethics Board, to Six Nations Public Library, Six Nations Polytechnic Deyohaha:ge Indigenous Knowledge Centre and the Woodland Cultural Center for the community to access. As well, a copy of the dissertation is available through university open access on the internet. A hard

copy was also presented to one of the Elders involved in supporting the Spirit of the Youth group during their five-year journey.

Lesson Learned from Native Youth

For many generations, First Nations people have experienced substantial oppression and social injustice as a result of policies of colonisation and assimilation, leaving families and communities frustrated, depressed, full of anger, and hopeless (Ball, 1998; Dillard & Manson, 2000; Duran, Duran, & Brave Heart, 1998; Duran & Duran, 1995; Freeman, 2005; Gagné, 1998; Government of Canada, 1996; Hill, Antone, & Myers, 1980; Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003; Lederman, 1999; Manson et al., 1996; McKenzie & Morrissette, 2003; Morrissette, McKenzie, & Morrisette, 1993; Quinn, 2007; Robin, Chester, & Goldman,1996; Thomas & Bellefeuille, 2006). As the population of First Nations people continues to increase, so do many of the issues and problems Native youth are facing. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People* (1996) describes how First Nations youth are enduring the loss of cultural identity, high rates of poverty, limited employment opportunities, overcrowding and inadequate living conditions, weakened social structures, racism, and a lack of recognition by mainstream society.

For many Native youth, these demoralising conditions have contributed to increased substance abuse, suicide and violence, and fatalities among Aboriginal children and youth (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Olson & Wahab, 2006; White Bear, 2003). Various reports have indicated that suicides amongst Native youth are five to six times higher than the national average (First Nations & Inuit Health, 2003; White, 2005). Indigenous scholar Barbara Waterfall (2002) recognises that the present-day conditions of Native people are "very grave" and are having a profound impact on children: "Addictions and violence are everyday occurrences. Many of our children do not want to live anymore. They do not see any hope" (p. 150). What is frightening is that the age at which Native youth are attempting suicides has become younger and younger. In addition, Native youth are becoming involved with group suicide pacts. Unfortunately, with the high rates of trauma, violence and suicides in many First Nations communities, youth have limited outlets and services by which to express their frustrations and pain (First Nations & Inuit Health, 2003). Incidents such as these leave communities and social service organisations questioning the fragmentation of policies and services that are supposed to help our Indigenous people and youth.

These two first paragraphs set the tone to how I was going to start this research with Native youth. It was not until I met with the youth and experienced how the youth see themselves that my research focus and views shifted. During one of our meetings in the early development of this study, a few members of the Spirit of the Youth Group questioned how *I* was framing this research. Overall the response for this research was supportive, yet the criticism the youth provided was very valuable. The youth expressed that they did not like how I framed First Nations youth in such a negative light—focusing on the problems and statistics of drug and alcohol use, suicides, high levels of poverty and unemployment, poor health, to name a few. Their critiques made me stop and think about how we as scholars and researchers have been constructing our youth as victims of their circumstance, when really they are agents of change and possess resiliency. While I agreed, and acknowledged their concern, I responded in saying: "To understand what is happening with some Native youth today we have to explore and understand the root causes and historical layers of unresolved grief and the emotional pain that our people have endured over generations. An important goal in my research is to represent what our Onkwehonwe youth are saying, as well, not saying." I explained to them that I did not want to replicate the same approach to research which continued to perpetuate a colonial and stereotypical perspective of the dysfunction and un-wellness among Native youth (Smith, 1999). I wanted to exemplify through the proposed research the strength and resiliency in which Onkwehonwe youth possess when they undertake a cultural journey on the land as a means of activism and social justice. The youth responded positively, yet wanted me to assure them that I would highlight the good intentions

they had in undertaking such a cultural-based journey (Freeman, 2015). I agreed!

What are the Unity Rides and Runs?

The Unity Rides and Runs are spiritual journeys which travel on either by horseback or foot during the summer months in reconnecting and unifying Native communities with the land and natural environment, language, cultural practices, and connecting to displaced relatives. The first Unity Rides and Runs (1993 to 1996) were organised by the Lakota people as an effort to reunite with their relatives that were relocated in Canada. The origin of such rides and runs emerged from the *Wiping the Tears* ceremonial rides (1986 to 1990) which provided spiritual healing and cultural connection to the Lakota people from the 1890 massacre of Wounded Knee.

The Lakota recognised the positive impact these cultural journeys had not only at an individual level, but brought communities and nations together. Each Unity Ride and Run travelled for four years and is then passed on to another Indigenous nation. The Northern Cree in Canada was the next Indigenous group to undertake the Unity Ride and Run (1997 to 2000). This group travelled four years in their traditional territory healing from their colonial experience and bringing back their traditional culture. The Unity Ride and Run was then passed on to the Okanagan people in British Columbia. The Okanagan travelled two years in their traditional territories (2001 to 2002) and in 2003 began to proceed eastward for two summers across Canada and parts of the United States to complete their four years by arriving at the 2004 International Indigenous Elders Summit held at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Ontario.

During this Summit, Native youth heard the urgency from the Elders regarding the lack of interest in learning cultural knowledge and ceremonies, and that Indigenous language were quickly dying in North America. The Elders spoke to the impact and effect of colonisation, marginalisation, assimilation, acculturation, residential schools, as well the lack of recognition regarding nation to nation agreements, treaty rights, and the rights of unceded land and territories still possessed by Indigenous nations. I remember observing the youth during this gathering as they discussed the devastation and realities in which they were inheriting, as well the impact this had on their families and communities. The youth spoke to the challenges which they endured daily because of the contemporary experiences with racism, oppression, structural inequalities, stereotyping, and the invisibility of youth. I also heard youth sharing their longing to acquire and understand: their cultural knowledge; to participation in traditional ceremonies and practices; to learn and understand their Native language; as well as having a sense of connection to their identity and belonging within their communities. For many youth, these desires stirred up many emotions (i.e. anger, sadness, emptiness, fear), yet it also fueled their desire and hope towards action and change. So, the youth created and brought forth a Youth Declaration to the summit Elders that expressed their desire to learn their language and culture, as well take a stand against the social injustices confronting their families, communities and nations. The Elders seeing the desire for action and change from the youth, decided that the youth would undertake the four-year spiritual journey of the Unity Run carrying the message of peace, unity and both the Youth and Elders Declarations.

The end of July in 2005, the youth began their first year of the Unity Run from the Grand River Pow Wow at Chiefswood Park, Six Nations, Ontario Canada and ran to the central fire of the Haudenosaunee—the Onondaga Nation (near Syracuse, New York). The youth relayed eastward on foot approximately 30 to 50 kilometers per day, resting at night at various farms and properties, Native Friendship Centres and Native/non-native communities along the way. One of the early highlights for the youth was crossing the International Border from Canada in to the United States at the Rainbow Bridge in Niagara Falls. One youth participant shares what they experienced while they crossed the bridge and the International Boarder exercising their rights to cross freely between Canada and the United States under the 1794 Jay Treaty.

> I remember one young man held up a strand of Wampum and we forged ahead, and they could not stop us. To me that was activism, exerting our right to cross the International Boundary Line without hindrance, just like our treaty promises us. We rose from the ashes and we said, "We are still here and look, we're going to go through your border." What did they do to us? Nothing. And this is post 9/11. I rode that wave of pride for days. I remember it was just the power that we built up walking over that bridge. The songs that we sang that motivated us, the energy of the falls and how the forces of nature came into harmony to support us. (Josie, adult participant in Freeman, 2015)

Two weeks later and traveling through their traditional lands and territories the SOY arrives at the Onondaga nation. Shortly after following the protocol of *visiting*, the youth met with the Chiefs and Clan Mothers regarding the purpose of their journey.

The SOY reconvened the Unity Run in 2006, starting a three-week journey from the Onondaga nation and heading north and slightly eastward to the Mohawk Territories of Tyendinaga (Bay of Quinte, Ontario), Kahnawake (Montreal, Quebec), and Akwesasne (Cornwall, Ontario). In 2007, the SOY Unity Run travelled south from Akwesasne through New York State's Adirondack Mountains and along the Hudson River to arrive at the United Nations in New York City on August 9, 2007, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The youth presented and spoke to world leaders sharing both the Youth and Elder Declarations. The United Nations organisers were impressed by the youth and invited them to present a few days later at the United Nations Fourth Annual Youth Assembly. While some of the youth stayed back to present at the UN Youth Assembly, the rest of the SOY continued to complete the journey for that year in the territory of the Pamunkey Nation in the state of Virginia.

What was to be the final year of the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run in 2008, the group was to travel to the Native communities of the Tuscarora and the Cherokee Nations, and then westward to the state of Oklahoma in hopes of completing their journey in reconnecting with the Seneca and Cayuga people who were relocated to *Indian Territory* (Oklahoma) in 1831. Unfortunately, the SOY youth faced many challenges during the 2008 Unity Run from limited financial resources to support themselves (food, fuel, camping, etc.) and little to no communal support (youth, parents or Elders) from their home communities. The lack of resources and support contributed to the burnout and illness of five youth participants attempting to complete this final commitment and journey of the Unity Run. At the arrival of a waterway referred to as *Indian Creek*, near the town of Olivehill, Tennessee, the group decided they would complete their journey at this creek. Despite the painful letdown of not making it to their final destination of Oklahoma, the group made a spiritual promise before heading home that they would return one day to complete their commitment and pass the Unity Run back to the Lakota nation.

During a community event in 2010, I met up with one of the SOY leaders where she expressed that she was having dreams and the SOY group needed to complete their commitment with the Unity Run. After discussions with Elders, the Spirit of the Youth group decided they would complete their Unity Run commitment, traveling from *Indian Creek* Tennessee May 22, 2011 to St. Paul, Minnesota for the 2011 World Peace and Prayer day on June 21st.

Indigenous-Based Resilience

Indigenous-based resilience is innate, spiritual, and is relational to the land and environment. Notions of such resilience are grounded in the cultural philosophies, values and epistemologies of Indigenous people despite the historical and current adversities Native people have had to endure for generations (Ermine, 1995; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008a; Kirmayer, Marshall, & Phillips, 2011; Sonn & Fisher, 1998). The SOY Unity Runs provided a sense of hope and an experience in recognising the strength and ability these young people possess "around culturally informed notions of personhood that link individual to community (both past and present) and to the land and environment" (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. 89). Fleming & Ledogar (2008b) share by saying that Indigenous-based resiliency attributes to a strong connection to "cultural identity, participation in traditional activities and

spirituality" (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008b, p. 61). Yet, Heavy Runner & Marshall (2003) contend that Native people gain a sense of resiliency when an opportunity to experience self-exploration and growth involves experiential learning. While these authors refer to the idea of cultural resilience in their writings, Tamara Marshall's (2011) graduate work on the Coastal Salish Canoe Journey emphasises that Indigenous-based resiliency exists as a modern-day rite of passage, encouraging personal growth through cultural experiential activities that contribute to awareness and transformation for all who participate, regardless of age.

The Unity Run journeys were an experiential journey of connecting to the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and the places where the Peacemaker journeyed in bringing the Great Law of Peace: living outdoors in the natural environment; providing a youth perspective and the peer modeling of cultural behaviours and values; balancing fun with responsibilities; having unconditional support, respect and guidance by Elders, parents and supportive adults; the experiential learning of Haudenosaunee teachings, skills and practical knowledge in relation building; problem solving; consensus building; and working as a collective.

The youth who participated with the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs awaken a sense of purpose that move beyond the issues and problems they were experiencing in their lives and communities. These youths learned what it meant to come to what the Haudenosaunee refer to as the *good mind*. Indigenous-based resilience also encompasses a level of agency, providing youth opportunities to expand their cultural consciousness through a goal-orientated action (White & Wyn, 1998). From an Indigenous perspective, resilience is developing a belief in oneself, but most importantly gaining that belief through the relationships and sense of belonging offered by the collective. In doing so, the confidence and worth of the individual is reciprocated back in strengthening the collective.

Making Meaning from Youth Experiences

Making meaning draws on a wholistic view of the stories and conversations shared by the youth and the adults who participated with the SOY Unity Runs and to understand how agency and resiliency has been developed through this culture-based experience. The results of this study are shaped into five themes: 1) culture-based activism; 2) the motivation and intent of participation; 3) the journey; 4) identity; and 5) well-being. By exploring these themes, we begin to understand how agency and resiliency flourishes with Native youth. The interpretation and perspectives of both Native youth and adults related through the principles Haudenosaunee cultural knowledge as the participants discuss what they had learnt through their journey and participation with the SOY Unity Runs.

Native Youth & Culture-based Activism

While there is a direct connection between spirituality and culture among Native people which guides, and influences our actions. Gusenneeyoh explains that: "If you're spiritual, your beliefs are tied to how you see the world, what you think and your life…and that's how they should live their life, then they're not drinking or using any of those mind changers." Jon also agrees and explains that "there has to be some sort of core principles and spirituality behind everybody's actions in activism. Because otherwise you're not really drawing on anything and it just makes it seem pointless in a way if there's not some sort of spirituality to identify with." Jesse describes that there are proper ways within our Haudenosaunee culture to understand our spiritual approaches, "we have stories and we have speeches on how to take care of things in a peaceful way." It is this Haudenosaunee epistemology which is based in the stories of the Peacemaker and the Great Law of Peace which directs us and our actions in a *good mind* (Freeman, 2015).

The *good mind* and *spirituality* are foundational concepts within Haudenosaunee culture, activism and agency. Emma explains that "spirituality is the 'good mind' and in our Haudenosaunee

language we say, Nay:ne wha ne: kora which is: 'in our minds is the power,'" meaning that we have the power of choice and the power to act, but our cultural principles and values (spirituality) guide our *good mind* in doing what is right as Haudenosaunee person (Freeman, 2015).

> We can live it, we can experience it and your spirituality teaches you to demonstrate that.... You know it's wrong to hurt, it's wrong to hit, it's wrong to lie. You have that in your good mind, but your spirituality says it is wrong. So, then you don't do it. They (the good mind and spirituality) help each other balance out. (Emma, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

The youth explained that Native "activism" is a hands-on approach. However, Dakota uses the term "actionist" to convey her proactive approach in guiding her actions in a way that will impact not only her life, but seven generations into the future. Whereas, some participants explained that activism is a reactive approach and is dependent on others making changes, an "actionist" is sovereign within their mind, choices and actions (Freeman, 2005).

> Actionist is somebody who does things, leading by example. If I want my community to speak Mohawk one day, I am not going to Band Council and get mad because there's no funding for language. I'm going to start speaking Mohawk, and do it in public. If I want my children to become healthy, self-aware Onkwehonwe people, I need to be a healthy and aware Onkwehonwe person myself. If my grandchild is not going to be healthy, it's because I did not raise a healthy daughter. So, I am keeping those things in mind. "Actionist" is generational, it's in your everyday life… you're putting that into the community, the people you interact with, the people that you welcome into your home and the way your family is. The way you do it with your children, and when your children do it with their own children. It's perpetual and it is ongoing, because it happens every single day. (Dakota, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

Other youth shared that our responsibilities regarding activism and agency entail "understanding our own history" and "taking a stand to 'right' that history". It's about putting aside your personal issues for the best of the community and our people. It is taking an active role in creating awareness and educating the settler population about our way of life and our beliefs. Activism is a way of life for Onkwehonwe people. It's about standing up for something that you believe in, heart and soul (Freeman, 2015).

Yet activism and agency can take on other forms such as a movement in healing, and the resurgence of culture. Jesse explains that the Unity Run was a movement and a unique approach for Native youth to learn about themselves:

> It was a cool thing for youth to do. Having kids outside... reconnecting culturally... and learning from experiences and responsibilities. It was a way for kids to be kids too, outside camping and running. To me it was a learning experience more than a movement. A movement definitely resulted from it, but in my opinion it was a cultural experience to be able to connect to different reserves and people that aren't Haudenosaunee in other areas. (Jesse, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

The Unity Run experience took youth out of their life situations (poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, violence, etc.) and put them among their peers, Elders and supportive adults to look at their lives from the outside in. These opportunities provided Native youth the opportunity to become secure in their identity, feel a sense of belonging and attain cultural knowledge and skills which they could use in their contemporary life. Emma explains: "The Unity Run was a path and you had to go into yourself to find that path that was right for you". For Dakota Unity Run was a form of activism, as well how to bring those cultural teachings and resiliency back to their families and communities (Freeman, 2015).

> Activism is the point where you get yourself into a situation and you pull yourself out…. But then you have to put yourself back into it later, and you learn something from the fact that you pulled yourself out of. You have learned from what you've seen, and you have to be responsible for bringing those teachings into your life. That's what it did, exactly the purpose of what activism does. It pulls you into a situation, but you have to be responsible for changing it. (Dakota, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

Mindy and Steph explained that the Unity Run was an active way in "learning, healing, helping, giving thanks," getting physical "spreading peace,

love and connecting to the spirits and to the land". It was a revitalising way back to our culture and way of being on the land (Freeman, 2015).

Nathan didn't believe that the Unity Run was a form of activism, but a form of agency and resilience.

> What we are doing is that we're taking action of our lives, and taking action to change our community.... On the Unity Run you were given the freedom to speak up; it's really empowering because you feel like what you're doing and what you said makes a difference.

Sammy shared that: "It was also an opportunity for the youth to show older people that they cared and were worried about the language, ceremonies and our cultural knowledge" (Freeman, 2015).

The youth and adult participants of this research expressed valid points pertaining to the Unity Run as something more than a social movement of Native young people. This experience encompassed a spirituality of action/activism from an Onkwehonwe consciousness which contributes to the agency and resilience of an individual. This brought me to wonder what was at the heart of their action—what motivated these youths to act? The next area explores the heart and motivation which guided these Native youths to partake in a youth-driven and youth-led spiritual and culture-based journey of activism.

The Motivation & the Spirit of the Youth

These youths were seeking a greater understanding of the world and a sense of purpose to life from a Haudenosaunee perspective. There were also those individuals who knew that they were Haudenosaunee or had Native ancestry, yet they did not understand what it meant to be *Onkwehonwe* other than possessing a Native status card. Unaware of the meaning of their indigeneity, these individuals *sought out* a cultural association through this experience.

By taking youth out of their community and family environment, traveling the land and surrounding themselves with their culture and other youth, these youths were all able to find support, cultural strength, friendship and pride in who they were as Haudenosaunee. The Unity Ride and Run was more than taking youth on a *trip*. Dakota expressed that "being on the land" and understanding the "responsibility" on a personal level were important attributes to learn regarding personal agency.

> For young people, it was a growing experience because you had to learn to take care of yourself. Nobody was going to clean up after you, nobody was going to watch your stuff for you, nobody was going to tell you to wake up and nobody was going to tell when to go to sleep—you had to. If you did not take care of those things then you lost your possessions, and then you lost your energy during the day if you did not take care of yourself. It was a growing experience. (Dakota, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

Gusenneeyoh shared that a sense of "camaraderie" was important for each youth to experience within their peer group and contributed to the well-being of an individual.

> It was like, you were allowed to be just with your thoughts, and talk to other people who were your age. I think because how society is now you don't necessarily get that chance…. You don't really expand out to any circle unless you're with your friends, but then you're usually off being a kid. You're not all on the same page of how we were with [our] culture. (Freeman, 2015)

A significant part for this journey for the youth was the organisational process in the five years they undertook this journey. The experience brought a sense of worth and fun to all who participated. Mandy explained that even some of the challenges the youth members endured, the hard work and dedication in the experience shaped and reaffirmed who they were as Onkwehonwe people. The Unity Runs brought a youthful perspective towards the way we participant in life, learning and fun. Phoebe, an adult volunteer who participated on the SOY Unity Run, explained, "I wanted to help them… achieve what it was they were trying to achieve, because I knew the experience would change them and… make core changes to who they are". Many of the skills learned through this experience have been transferred and used in other life situations.

The next theme explores the journey and the youth's perspectives on how this experience

touched their lives and improved their well-being as people.

The Journey – The Transformation of Identity and Well-being

For Haudenosaunee people, the cultural values and principles which have contributed to and sustained our collective structure (family, clan and community) greatly contribute to the pride and identity of an individual. The sense of belonging and love felt throughout the collective structure of a Native community reinforces that individual's identity. Therefore, what youth experienced in their family was how they see themselves in their community and the world. The Unity Ride and Runs became a family structure based in the principles and values of traditional Native culture. For those youths who may have come from troubled or disengaged families, the Unity Rides and Runs provided the love and the sense of belonging they may have longed for. Nathan and Sammy shared that even as they missed their family and community: "You've come so close with the ones you've been on the Run, they become your family… it's like your actual family". Another youth, Shelly shares the importance of having a sense of family:

> [These people] became your big brother, your big sister, your little sisters…. A lot of those kids I found didn't know what it was to have someone actually cared about them. They didn't know that people could worry about them if they were gone a half an hour. I always had that with my sisters and my mother because we are such a big family. These kids coming into it had no clue to what an actual family unit was about. (Shelly, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

She continued to explain that in Longhouse tradition, there is a large network of people to rely on and if you were doing something wrong, they cared enough to tell you. These principles of caring and family were some of the factors which assisted in the success of the SOY Unity Run.

The experiences the youth shared during this Unity Run journey contributed to transformations experienced by some youth. Steph shares what she witnessed with one youth and the transformation he experienced due to his participation on the Unity Runs:

> Hearing their stories how they were before they came onto the Run, drinking and drugs. They'd say "life is boring" or "they got nothing better to do on the weekends." They come onto the Run and… I think because identity is a part of it… they didn't quite understand who they were as an Onkwehonwe person and this kind of opened a window for them to start to think about who they were…. It sparked an interest and pulled them, because they felt that love, and at the same time [part of a] group. It was kind of like a cool factor, where everybody is like "hey these people are into their ways and they're proud of who they are. And look, they're running all this way." Then you hear afterwards how transforming it was for them. One [youth] said before the Run he was considering suicide. After the Run, he thought it was so amazing. It wasn't long after the Run that he saved somebody from committing suicide. Then there are other stories, I see these kids… they're not kids anymore they're adults now… [and] have kids. Before you could see the mischievousness in them wanting to get into stuff, but they came on the Run…. The friends that were made, they're still friends today. They're at Longhouse and they're really doing good. (Steph, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

I wondered if the impact or the transformation which these youths experienced stemmed from their connection to the land and the natural environment or the physicality of running. I posed this question to several the youth and parents in this study. One parent expressed that the "reconnection to the land" and having the experience of sleeping, cooking and caring for ourselves outside was important, and referred to this connection as being already "hardwired" in our beings. The experience also brought a

> hands on, minds on, as well a day to day bustle of movement… You're elevated to a different spiritual place when you are there, and there are no words that can describe how well it felt. For me and my kids… it was a return to something really old and ancient in a really modern time…. Feeling the essence of your ancestors, whose everyday villages were founded on a connection to the land. (Josie, adult participant in Freeman, 2015)

Yvonne, one of the youth leaders, shared the spiritual connection the youth felt as they ran and connected with the land:

> The energy that you get when you're running [and]… connected to the land, a lot of spiritual things happened to you… I think that positive good energy was a part of the spiritualness of it. Things happening to people that just can't be explained, people seen things… [and] felt things. When you're running you could feel somebody running with you or seeing eagles flying over and following us. [You] ask for rain and it comes…. People got a taste of what it feels like to be in balance, to see that response back from nature and the rest of the universe…. It was just something that they had not experienced before, or seen how real it was… it's important that we always have our blinders open so we don't lose focus. (Yvonne, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

For Indigenous people, we have a relationship and connection to the land and territory which we are born upon. However, the relationship to land is our direct connection to our ancestors and to those unborn children of future generations.

Onkwehonwe Identity

The Unity Rides and Runs provided a prospect to learn about ourselves and the world around us in a culturally supportive environment which encouraged the healing of individuals and families. Native youth sought an understanding of their First Nations identity through the experiential means, learning their cultural history, values and principles, as well as participating in cultural practices and ceremonies. Brook explained to me the importance of "being involved" with a cultural journey like the Unity Run as a way of connecting to an understanding of her identity as a Native person:

> My view of myself… has changed a lot… from the beginning when I first got involved. [The Unity Run] connected me more to spirit… [and] everything that is living… and how to be humble and thankful, more than I knew how. I have grown more spiritually over the years by reconnecting to the people, to the land, to the spirit and myself. I started to be more real. You feel yourself as Onkwehonwe, just in that description is… what it means… your "real self." It kind of came more into focus… during the Unity Run, of being "real." (Brook, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

There were a few youths who were not aware of their Native identity, until they participated on the SOY Unity Runs. As Jesse puts it, "I felt like I had woken up. Before the Unity Ride happen, I never thought about being Native". As Jon and others continued to participate in the multiple years of the Unity Run they continued to learn more about their identity,

> it's like this evolving teaching experience… [with] a good community environment… [and]a constant flux of information…. It definitely inspired me to seek out more of my culture and my heritage. I think it had the same effect on a lot of people… they had fun, but they also learned a lot about themselves…. It definitely helped me learn more about myself. (Jon, youth participant in Freeman, 2015).

The Unity Run was a way of (re)connecting youth to their culture and to their identity. One youth expressed,

> when I got on the Run and… started going to Iroquois communities and having Socials… it really hit me just how much I missed being a part of my heritage…. I'd made a point when I came back to make sure that I'd went back to Longhouse, went back to ceremonies and contribute more to community…. Sometimes you don't really miss something… [until] it comes back to you and you embrace it again. (Freeman, 2015)

For other youth, the Unity Run demonstrated to them that they can embrace the cultural knowledge they grew up with and pass that knowledge on to ensure their children are secure in their place within the culture and their identity as an Onkwehonwe person. Emma who lived a traditional lifestyle all her life understood what it meant to "be who you are" as a Haudenosaunee. Therefore, for some the participation in the Unity Runs did not instill a sense of identity, but it opened their minds to asking questions as to what it meant to be a Haudenosaunee or an Onkwehonwe person.

The next theme explores the notion of well-being (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) and how the Unity Run contributed to the learning and personal growth which these youth have

experienced as a foundation for healing and wellness.

Well-being

When most people think about well-being they first think about an individual's well roundedness and the balance of their physical, spiritual, mental and emotional facets. One youth described well-being as "a song within us," when "it resonates inside us… it's like we're lined up inside, it creates a balance and peace". However some youth on the Unity Run came on the journey feeling as though they were not "in-line" or not possessing "peace or balance" in their lives. They explained that they felt more like they harbored a deep "hole within… who they are as an individual" prior to joining the Unity Run (Steph, youth participant in Freeman, 2015). These youths had been searching for something to fill that "hole." Unfortunately, some turned to drugs, alcohol and other substances. Shelly expressed that because of the dire circumstances in which young people are living, they don't have a "chance to prosper or thrive" in their life. They feel "empty," "lost" or "categorised" because of their meager living conditions, lack of a cultural connection or because of the poor choices they have made.

It was clear the physical and mental challenges the Unity Run journey would pose to any individual. However, some participants were unaware of the emotional impact that such a journey would have on their well-being as an individual. Steph shares how the support of the adults and the other youth were there for those "kids who needed someone to talk to, and if they had questions or didn't feel comfortable or if things happened to them…. I think because it was so highly spiritual and at the same time physically demanding…. [I]t brought out a lot of emotions that were kind of pushed down or swallowed." (Freeman, 2015) For other youth and adults, the Unity Run journey represented the beginning stages in understanding themselves and what they went through in their lives prior to becoming involved with the Unity Run. One adult who supported the youth during the Unity Run spoke about a couple of youth who were "struggling so hard" and were into "drugs and stuff," and because of their involvement with the Unity Run these youth "COMPLETELY turned around and went in a clean clear direction and it was because being involved in something that had meaning" (Phoebe, adult participant in Freeman, 2015). When an experience provides awareness or meaning to our lives, it can have an impact on our mind and emotions leading to possible change or a search for those answers within ourselves. Other youth and adults commented that the journey was a moment of awareness regarding the "bigger picture" in how everything in life is interconnected. Steph shares her reflections on the impact the Unity Run had on her life:

> I feel like having gone through something like that… it's so rich in a lot of different areas. It had a big memorable impact on me, and I think in life when you have big impacts on you it sticks… for a long time, maybe forever. So not only does it stick, it transforms in a good way. So, I think that… it's helping me to always keep that big picture in mind. To live that way, to not just talk about it or say I'm going to think about the big picture, but do it and be it. (Steph, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

The Unity Run has touched many people on a deep level whether they expected it or not. All the youth spoke about the importance of the Great Law Peace and the concepts of Peace, the Power of a Good-Mind and the Righteousness of having a Good Mind. The youth began to understand their well-being in relation to the living tenets of the Great Law and the virtue in how this contribute to all of creation. The well-being for the Haudenosaunee is directly connected to Kaianeren:kowa or the Great Law of Peace and The Good-Mind. Dakota explains the literal translation of Kaianeren:kowa and what it means:

> Kaianere:kowa, the Great law. In that word, it's literally… means "a good path." It's a path that is being made and we use that word that Kaianew:ne in there means "that it's a foot path." I have heard that word… Kaianew:ne is not just a "foot path," it's the energy it takes to make those two foot prints. The one that goes ahead of it, it's the energy between those. Each set you get Ioyanre from that, which means "it is good." That's why we have the energy to make those foot prints. We used that root word to make the word Ioyanre – "good" and kowa at the end just means… it's extravagant, it's huge. It's like an

> exclamation mark, pretty much. In English, they have a term, common sense that is my best way of putting it…. Kaianere:kowa, you don't need to know the stories of the Peace Maker to know if something good or bad. It's really a good thing to know because it's the philosophy. It's the way of life... I feel like it's getting more and more necessary for people to talk about it, because there are so many different versions of it. Not totally different but there are just little things, where people say…. But when somebody recites anything from the Great Law they're giving you their best understanding of it. (Dakota, youth participant in Freeman, 2015)

Having journeys such as the Unity Runs is the essence of well-being for Onkwehonwe people, it provides us with sense of responsibility, care and belonging to our past, present and future.

Discussion

Indigenous-Based Agency and Resilience

The Haudenosaunee youth, some of whom formed the Spirit of the Youth working group, are now young adults pursuing post-secondary education, working towards establishing careers and having families of their own. As they participated with this research, they shared their insights, reflections and stories pertaining to the purpose and sense of responsibility they felt as young people in carrying through with the spiritual and physical journey of the SOY Unity Runs from 2005 to 2008, completing this spiritual commitment in 2011. The social agency these youth exhibited in the form of activism based, guided by their Haudenosaunee cultural practices and knowledge, contributed greatly to the resiliency they developed within themselves.

White & Wyn (1998) explains that the Westernised concept of agency incorporates the reflection and impending action of individuals or groups on an issue or matter. Yet for Haudenosaunee people/youth, Indigenous-based agency is related to the thought/reflection and action as it relates to the philosophy, spirituality and epistemology of that Indigenous culture and the connection to land or place. Watts (2013) and Trinidad (2009) conceptualise this form of Indigenous agency in the terms of *place-based thought* (Watts, 2013) and *place-based action* (Trinidad, 2009). Taking the essence of these ideas, Indigenous agency possesses ebb and flow as it takes on a life of its own through the spiritual connections and epistemology Indigenous people have with the earth and creation. This spiritual connection takes us to a place deep within ourselves and re-awakens our consciousness to the cosmologic responsibility we have with our Mother the Earth, our natural environment and to the future generations of our people.

The Unity Runs themselves provided the *material circumstances* for the youth to create space and time to critically reflect on their life situations and to make the choice of action in linking their personal circumstances to the broader agenda of social justice and culture-based activism. These journeys were guided by the agency and resiliency of these youth which stemmed from their cultural (re)connection to their consciousness, spirituality, and to the place and land of their ancestors. Vanessa Watts (2013) articulates that:

> Human thought and action are… derived from a literal expression of particular places and historical events in Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies. The agency that place possesses… follows… Indigenous peoples, we are extensions of the very land we walk upon,… [then]we have an obligation to maintain communication with it… if we do not care for the land we run the risk of losing who we are as Indigenous peoples. (p. 23)

Therefore, the agency which Indigenous people possess goes far beyond the objectification of Western society in understanding the earth and our natural environment. For Indigenous people, agency and resiliency connect us back to our epistemology, understanding of creation and the spiritual agency of Sky Woman and her consciousness as she created Turtle Island (Watts, 2013). Therefore, Sky Woman's consciousness continues to resonate and live within the earth and our beings.

Conclusion

In many Native communities, families and individuals have been in a constant state of crisis and/or grief due to the trauma we as a people have endured for many generations (Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995; Duran & Duran, 1999) with no opportunity to heal or move beyond grief. The

youth in this study explained that as Onkwehonwe people we are not to live our lives in a constant circumstance of crisis or in a reactive state. The Unity Rides and Runs journeys allowed Native youth to liberate by means of connecting to our original teachings, cultural practices, and spirituality through our interactions with the land and the natural environment, as well as connect to each other in a positive way, finding peace and healing through the experience.

Indigenous resilience is acknowledging and understanding our ontological responsibility as Indigenous people to protect and care for the earth, our territories and the natural environment for future generations to come. The Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs, as well as other forms of culture-based activism were and have been a form of resilience and self-determination in providing youth and adults with a new awareness and a greater level of Indigenous consciousness (Duran, 2006) regarding their humility and actions by undertaking roles and responsibilities to their respective nation, as well to the natural world.

As an Indigenous community member and scholar, I have been graced with the opportunity to participate in some of these community youth-based ventures and journeys. Therefore, I have come to believe strongly that when our Onkwehonwe people discover and acquire a sense of purpose through the foundation of our culture, it mobilises us into action which comes from an Indigenous perspective and supports our values, beliefs and epistemologies. By upholding and protecting the inherent knowledge and rights that primarily define who we are as Native people, we gain an understanding regarding our purpose, and gain a sense of hope and well-being. This inherent knowledge reaches deep down through the problems and issues of colonisation, oppression and marginalisation and reawakens the foundation of who we are as Onkwehonwe people.

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