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HEALING THROUGH CULTURE

Hilistis Pauline Waterfall

THERE'S A HEILTSUK CHILD IN ME whose growth stopped at the age of twelve and doesn't know a Heiltsuk adulthood. Conversely, there's a white adult in me who started to grow at the age of twelve but doesn't know a white childhood. I left home at age twelve to attend school far from home and was thrust into a foreign world in complete cultural shock. Not having a good command of English compounded the problem. The Indian residential school system was imposed on us as First Nations children in Canada for at least 125 years. Its painful and negative results are documented through the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC, which brought into broad public light the multigenerational cultural loss and displacement of at least 150,000 First Nations children, including me.

According to Murray Sinclair, the chair of the TRC, education caused this mess, and education will also get us out. As a survivor of this system, my indoctrinated mind equated education with Western

values. I am now confident that the key to unravelling this mess lies in equating education with more traditional Heiltsuk values. Despite the intergenerational disruption in the transmission of knowledge, our collective cultural memory continues to exist, inform, and support the renewal and revitalization of Heiltsuk ceremonies, values, teachings, language, and beliefs. Decolonizing my programmed Western mind and embracing my Heiltsuk mind through traditional learning were key to reinforcing my sense of place, both within my Heiltsuk culture and the outer Western world.

Innate memory runs deep and, when nurtured and guided, helped me to heal and rekindle my confidence and cultural pride. The revival of cultural memory was fundamental in the steps taken to help rebuild our potlatch system over the past thirty years. Heiltsuk youth now participate freely in learning our Hałłzaqv language, in dancing, singing, drumming, and other cultural ways that were banned for at least six decades. Based on my experience, cultural renewal is key to continued adaptation and survival, and traditional education will continue to provide a pathway to healing and reconciliation.

My Heiltsuk childhood was warm, predictable, and safe. My parents nurtured and instilled Heiltsuk values, including the importance of honesty, respect, generosity, and sharing. The sense of family was strongly rooted. The spirit of community and belonging was solid. Immersion in Heiltsuk ways and language was my reality, as was a healthy diet of natural and abundant Heiltsuk traditional foods. Opportunities to learn and develop essential skills in age-appropriate tasks were provided. A sense of responsibility was instilled as was a sense of confidence and connectedness. Berry picking with my

mother was important bonding time, giving me the satisfaction of contributing to my family's needs. Emerging conflict-resolution skills, social development, team work, and relationship building came from childhood and sibling relationships. All this was to change suddenly without adequate preparation or explanation.

My life was like a piece of cork tossed into the ocean at the mercy of storms and changing tides – alone, confused, afraid, disconnected, and lost. Navigating the outside world eclipsed my Heiltsuk roots and often left me caught between the cracks of these two worlds, not truly fitting into either. Formal education was fraught with preconceived racialized perceptions of my being academically handicapped. Despite pitfalls, I persisted and eventually attained my bachelor of education degree from the University of British Columbia at the age of forty-five. As a mature, and perhaps naive, student, I had assumed that the Western educational environment would be more welcoming and open. For the most part it was, but my fragile confidence still found it alienating and intimidating.

In the eighteen years during which I was removed from my Heiltsuk world, I had to adjust to a world that was the complete opposite of what I had known. As a mere number in residential school, I experienced confusion, fear, and isolation. Rather than the more rational *t'gai'la* (to give advice) that I had experienced as a Heiltsuk child, corporal punishment was a standard practice. *Responsibility* in such institutions meant menial chores such as scrubbing floors with a toothbrush as a consequence of trying to question harsh expectations that never seemed rational or reasonable. An inadequate and high-carbohydrate diet of unfamiliar and strange foods left me hungry

and longing for the home-cooked, protein-rich diet that I was used to. Opportunities to further develop decision-making skills, family relationships, and healthy social awareness were almost nonexistent. The dormitories were filled with lonely, misplaced girls like me.

Between the time that I left the school and returned home, I travelled back and forth between Bella Bella and other places in British Columbia thirty-four times. I settled permanently in Bella Bella after eighteen years of being away. I was a stranger in my homeland, no longer fitting into my Heiltsuk world and with no sense of belonging to my family. Without any clues to guide my reintegration, and with a feeling of being “Heiltsuk ignorant,” I began to ask questions, most of which must have seemed ridiculous to my parents and old people of the day. In retrospect, I now understand why my Heiltsuk teachers were so patient – they too had had alienating and difficult experiences. I later learned that a 98 percent dropout rate from schooling was an understandable response to an unhealthy situation.

Upon my permanent return to Bella Bella, I found my ninety-six-year-old great-grandmother entering the last stages of life. I intuitively felt that learning about her was a key to my Heiltsuk quest. As a tribute to her, I undertook a genealogy project to honour her. Not knowing that she had had twenty-two children, I became consumed with researching and documenting what I thought would be a simple family tree. More than half of her children had died when they were babies, but she had ten surviving adult children – all of whom were old-age pensioners with large families of their own. I discovered that after her husband had died, my great-grandmother became a resilient and independent widow who built three houses

in her lifetime to accommodate her growing, extended family. She had 396 direct descendants spanning five generations, and I was her oldest great-grandchild. I documented her family tree in a booklet and distributed it at a feast to honour her memory. Imagine my surprise when other families asked me to help create their family trees. I was baffled until I realized just what a toll the removal of five generations of Heiltsuk children to residential schools had taken on family relationships across the community. Through memory and interviews over five years, we pieced together the intergenerational connections to nearly every coastal village, based on the previous practice of arranged marriages between offspring of hereditary chiefs. The process was both exhilarating and gratifying, as we learned together. What began as a personal quest to understand where I fit in ended up being an important healing outcome that continues today. These days, the host of every potlatch and feast documents maternal and paternal family trees, which are attached to the programs and distributed to guests. Consequently, there is now a strong understanding of who our *waa-waax-toos* (family relations) are, which is a key to continued healing of our fractured past.

In 1968, my non-Heiltsuk husband arrived in my community as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He observed a striking lack of cultural identity or practices that defined us as Heiltsuk people and as a community. Because of the potlatch ban and the missionary hospital, church, and school, which had been in our village for a century, our Heiltsuk ceremonies and customs had nearly vanished. Nearly two decades later, in 1985, my husband observed how extended our mortuary processes were and asked if this

was because we revered death. After my initial offence and shock in response to his question, I reached out to old people for an answer. I learned that during the potlatch ban and missionary influences, cultural practices went underground and were practised in private homes with windows blacked out during times of death. Apparently, the missionaries had compassion for our people during these times of mourning and allowed some mortuary practices to continue. To take advantage of this opportunity, nonmortuary practices were also conducted. To accommodate our “illicit” cultural practices in a nonpublic setting, some of our chiefs had built large two-storeyed homes: the main floor was made up of a big living room area that accommodated up to fifty or more guests, alongside a small kitchen to prepare food to feed guests. All bedrooms were built on the top floor. This was an ingenious solution to sustain some of our Heiltsuk practices.

In 1985, I asked my grandmother why customs such as coming-of-age practices were included during mortuary feasts. She was still under the impression that there was a law against potlatches, and I presume that there wasn't an official announcement when this policy was reversed. After our conversation, Granny and I began to talk about the various ceremonies and practices that would have taken place in a regular feast or potlatch setting and what took place in a mortuary feast. She taught me that *Nuyem* is a Heiltsuk word that describes the treasure chest of memories and knowledge that embodies and holds ancestral cultural inheritance through stories, dances, traditional names, history, and so on. We began to differentiate which practices were mortuary and which weren't and to reweave the threads of knowledge and ways based on memories of several knowledge keepers.

In that same year, a family member asked me to help put together a program for a potlatch – the first in one hundred years to be held in our community. Again, my ignorance of Heiltsuk ways required me to interview, question, and document the remnants of existing potlatch knowledge. I learned about ceremonies that included youth coming of age, mourning ceremonies, washing or purification ceremonies, traditional wedding ceremonies, and so on. Parallel to my cultural investigation, there was a Heiltsuk man who had returned home after being at residential school. He was an artist on a mission to learn Heiltsuk songs, dances, names, and so on. His mother was a seamstress who made button blankets and aprons with family animal crests. We began to put together the potlatch program based on the recollections of our knowledge keepers. The potlatch was a success and sparked a cultural flame.

Ironically, it was work by the German American anthropologist Franz Boas at the turn of the twentieth century that created a valuable resource used to trigger memories of Heiltsuk. Although incomplete, the stories he gathered helped to rebuild the memory bank needed to piece together a semblance of the potlatch held in 1985. This fragile beginning has now blossomed into a strong cultural foundation that draws from individual and collective memories. In fact, it has flourished so much that young children now host an annual school cultural ceremony based on the potlatch system. The Qqs Projects Society organizes a yearly Koeye Camp, an innovative Heiltsuk youth science and cultural camp program that takes place every summer in the Koeye River Valley. Through the camp, children learn, practise, and refine their Heiltsuk ways, including traditional

dancing, singing, feasting, food harvesting, medicine making, and basket weaving. They participate at potlatches by performing the “Children’s Play Dance Series.” Because of a resurgence in Heiltsuk art and sewing regalia, most Heiltsuk now own a dance blanket and apron and have been bestowed with an ancestral name – practices that had earlier been banned during an era when Heiltsuk names were forcibly replaced by Christian ones derived from the Bible. Shared inheritance and cultural history that had been denied for so long were being rewoven through the strands of recollection. Through this, my Heiltsuk child started to grow again.

Local control of local education was assumed in 1976. As a founding member of the community school board, I was excited and filled with hope at the possibilities of Heiltsuk content enhancing Western curriculums, enabling our students to learn from the best of both worlds. For the first time in one hundred years, our young people didn’t have to leave home to attend high school. We expected community members to flock to the school to support and celebrate the learning of their children. We were mystified when that didn’t happen. Over time, we learned that many of our people had had negative educational experiences. Most adults had attended residential schools and lived with toxic memories that resulted in fear and mistrust of educational systems. To gain trust and support, we created family-focused events. Forty-two years later, the community school concept is a reality, and there are more than twenty-five certified Heiltsuk-born teachers who work here and elsewhere: a living example of how negative memories can be healed through patience, encouragement, and inclusion.

For many years, I've had a recurring nightmare of being lost. In this troubling dream, I try to find my way home but am unsuccessful. I find myself in alien settings, where I fear for my life, but I'm determined to go home. Last month, however, I had a dream in which I reached closure. In the dream, I walked down a long road that would lead me home. There were deep and dangerous potholes, a treacherously cracked pavement, and seemingly insurmountable barriers over which I had to climb to continue on my journey. At some point, I came upon an old man slumped in a wheelchair and clothed in rags. The wheelchair sat at a sharp angle, and the old man was at risk of tumbling off the road. I stopped to help and was shocked to discover that the man was my father. He, too, was trying to find his way home after escaping from a residential school. I pushed his wheelchair, and we went home. My mother was so happy to see us that she invited relatives to feast with us. In a short time, my father's age was reversed, and he was transformed into a younger, more vital, and strong man. Our relatives embraced us and celebrated our return home.

I woke from the dream with happy and sad tears streaming down my face, happy because we had found our way back home, sad because I now understood my father's experiences. He had been taken away to attend residential school at the age of seven and returned when he was sixteen years old. He passed away four years ago, and during our life together we had difficulty expressing our feelings for each other. He was hard-working, disciplined, responsible, and caring. He was the son of a hereditary chief who had provided for and protected his family. As our cultural ways grew, I encouraged him to take on his

rightful role as a *Hemas* (hereditary chief). At first, he was reluctant, but I promised to help him based on what I had learned about our potlatch system. In the end, he did host a potlatch and ascended to his rightful place as a *Hemas*. He connected with his extended family from another village, and they came to participate in and support him in his cultural celebration. They remembered his paternal lineage and, through this, helped him to heal from that long-standing disconnection. This was such good medicine for his Heiltsuk soul.

As I continued my journey to my Heiltsuk self, I was blessed with many mentors. One of them was an old man who telephoned me often to share stories and educate me in Heiltsuk knowledge and teachings. To paraphrase, he always began our lessons by saying, “Put on your Heiltsuk mind and leave your white mind alone for a while, so I can teach you something about us.” Or he would begin by asking me to look at my skin and tell him what colour it was on that day. He was a fluent *Haílzaqv* speaker and had limited command of the English language. When we spoke, he would remind me to speak slower – not because he was stupid, but because he had to convert into his *Haílzaqv* mind what I had said in English, to think about it in the *Haílzaqv* context, change it back to English, and then respond. When I first heard him say this, I was completely taken aback because of the depth of teaching that he imparted. In essence, he taught me that the two worlds of which I was a part were very different and that both had value. He reminded me that I was born into our Heiltsuk world, had been removed from it, and then became confused and lost. His candor helped me to realize how much my mind had been acculturated and how mindful I must be

to decolonize my indoctrinated Western thinking and reality. His Heiltsuk education helped me find my way home.

The ancestral name that I inherited from my maternal grandmother is Hilistis. It's a name that comes from an old village where an animal race circumnavigating the world took place. Whichever animal returned home first would signify the reigning animal clan of that village. In the story, the raven is first to return. Loosely translated, *Hilistis* means "starting out on a journey and staying on course until it is completed in full circle by returning home." What an appropriate name, given my quest to relocate my Heiltsuk self and find my journey home. The gift of memory has been instrumental in my Heiltsuk cultural reconnaissance. At last, the twelve-year-old Heiltsuk girl in me has become an old woman who, in turn, has become a knowledge holder and teacher. It is now her turn to share with others who are trying to find their way back to their cultural selves.

