

Inaugural Indigenous Innovation Summit November 18 - 20, 2015, Winnipeg, Manitoba, CANADA

Reflections, Allyson Hewitt, Senior Fellow
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*Led by the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) in partnership with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, a group of about 300 Indigenous and non-Indigenous social innovators gathered in Winnipeg, Manitoba for the **Inaugural Indigenous Innovation Summit.***

The experience was powerful, emotional, and for many of us, transformative.

The following is my attempt to capture some of the wisdom from the event; to share with you what was said; what was felt; and what we can all do.

For those who have been to Winnipeg, you will be surprised to hear that we arrived in November to a sunny day without snow. That soon changed and as night fell we were hit with a mighty snowstorm, plummeting temperatures and wind. As we set about complaining, our Indigenous hosts reminded us of this saying: “if it snows, let it,” one of many lessons about our need to align with, and not fight, nature that we would hear more about through the event. At a later session, Paul Lacerte, of the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres talked about snow as Mother Earth seeding the ground and working hard through her gestation period to bring us upcoming bounties. Hard to complain about that.

Co-hosted by the “**warrior women**” Waneek Horn-Miller and Tina Keeper who set the stage for the influential role women play in Indigenous culture. Throughout, they offered their stories, their humour and their intellect for our benefit.

So what does innovation mean in this context? There were many comments about having to Google or ask Siri about what innovation was but all were clear that Friendship Centres are an Indigenous innovation and that innovation is in fact, an Indigenous value. There was a call for a rejection of the concept that innovation only means *new*, and recognition that innovation can also emerge from tradition. There was a suggestion that we should always “look back before we look forward.”

So why hold this Summit at this place and time? According to Stephen Huddart of the McConnell Foundation, this is exactly the right moment for Canada to hold this event. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is concluding its work; we had an election that saw unprecedented voter turnout from Aboriginal populations; the 4R movement is bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth together; and there has

been an important declaration from Canadians for a New Partnership. He also noted that Winnipeg is the birthplace of Reconciliation Canada.

If there was one theme that was present it was the profound, intergenerational impact of residential schools. But instead of simply accepting this tragedy, we heard stories of reclaiming the language of “warriors” which many prefer to the more often used “survivors.”

The introductory session on social innovation started with Paul Lacerte, who outlined the disturbing statistics we all know: Indigenous children have a 50% graduation rate; they are over-represented in jails; in suicide statistics; and in the numbers of kids in care. He called for a “new medicine” that values Indigenous culture and “ways of knowing and being” to move beyond simply surviving. And to recognize that loneliness is a plague that we are experiencing, but with a strong connection to our ancestors and to the land, we need never feel alone.

Stephen also spoke of how the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)** “unsettled the settler” and of the value of the grandmother in Indigenous culture. He then linked this to social innovation by outlining the “Social 8,” which includes: social innovation, social entrepreneurship, social finance, social technology, social labs, social media, social education and social space.

As one example of **where innovation is needed**, he spoke about the challenge Indigenous populations face in getting a mortgage, and how there is work underway to launch an Indigenous Bond.

We heard from project leader Diane Roussin about the **Winnipeg Boldness Project (WBP)** and the work they are doing to bring the whole self (head and heart) to their child-centred work in Pointe Douglas in Winnipeg’s north end. In explaining that their work is designed to benefit all in the community, Diane was clear that “Indigenous knowledge works for all.” This reframing of the narrative was a theme that ran throughout the event, as was the use of humour, connection to spirituality, emotions, passion and physical connection, with the value of relationships placed above all else.

We heard from Cheryl Rose about her work in **social innovation education** at the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (with the apt acronym, WISIR), the amazing work with the Haida Gwaii Higher Education Society and the opportunity to join the second cohort of the Getting to Maybe Social Innovation Residency held in Banff, Alberta.

I spoke about **social entrepreneurship** and the movement of both charities and for-profit organizations to the messy middle of making money and making impact, and about definitions of **social entrepreneurs** that include thinking big and valuing the assets of the people you are working with.

I also talked about how **social tech** can feel overwhelming but when it works well it is all about relationships and storytelling two facets that have already emerged as Indigenous values. I also issued a call for support of the UN Declaration on access to the Internet as a human right.

Aaron Good of **Innoweave** spoke about innovation as **new ideas to make things better**. Although a little change is good, big change is a lot better. He also noted that in this space we are learning and adapting as we go and it is all really about hard work.

In one of the most powerful sessions, a group of three young women joined two Elders – Maria Campbell and Dave Courchene – on the stage to discuss **Intergenerational Innovation**.

Elder Maria Campbell stressed the importance of knowing where you are from, of knowing your language and your culture, and emphasized that home is in fact where we are – and that place is important. She urged the youth to “find a grandmother,” and to keep connected to the land. We need to be respectful, kind, generous and compassionate with each other as our true identity comes from our interactions with others.

Elder Dave Courchene spoke of Indigenous people as free, independent leaders of their homeland and that no one can speak on their behalf but them, and of the importance of valuing mentorship and that true success is about values. His advice on how to support young people: tell them the truth.

The young women on the panel, who all spoke in their home language, spoke of being determined and careful, of believing they can do what needs to be done. They spoke of the importance of placing the spirit and the creator at the centre of their efforts to lead a good life.

They reflected on the challenge of both honouring and moving beyond the TRC and of their desire to move from “intergenerational trauma” to “intergenerational love,” which they see as the path to resilience. They were advised that strength comes from walking the same path as others.

They questioned how they see themselves, of understanding what happened to them, of what was wrong with them and how “to learn about self is to understand the pain and history” but to move on from the long painful history to get beyond victimization.

The Elders also indicated **that the settlers who came to Canada became victimizers** and their approach was all about separation: men from women; parents from children; everyone from the land.

In another example of **reframing the narrative**: to remind people of how honoured children are in Indigenous communities, the Elders encouraged the young women to “learn to live like a (momma) bear.” With 11,000 Indigenous children currently in care, there has been a massive failing in the system, but now is the time to “take back their stuff.”

Finally the young women spoke of their **desire to reconcile with the spirit**, that we are all connected, that Indigenous people need to get beyond the world view on the reservation but ultimately they all have it inside them to succeed.

Waneek, our co-host, reminded the room that they are “**descended from the best of the best**” and she suggested one trick for getting beyond lateral violence is the practice gratitude and giving 10 compliments a day.

Back in the **Winnipeg Boldness Project Lab** we scanned pictures and indicated whether or not we thought they were consistent with Indigenous values. It caused wonderful discussions to emerge.

The Boldness project is seeking to encourage participation in the **Canada Learning Bond**, which can contribute \$2,000 for each child towards their education. Approximately 2,500 children have already been signed up in Winnipeg’s north end but over 10,900 are eligible. **The problem**: kids and their families don’t believe postsecondary education is an option for them. To address this, the Boldness project looked at other places where this may have worked and they found the Indiana Promise, which is promoting the belief that all kids want and are worth a postsecondary education. This is described as one of their “proofs of possibility.”

In a summary of day one we heard that intergenerational approaches are at the core of innovation; that we need a common vision before coming up with new solutions; and, as an example of progress, that the University of Winnipeg just made taking a course in native studies a pre-condition for graduation.

Ultimately we were directed to always remember who we are doing this work for.

As **day two** got started, Tina Keeper set the tone by claiming “we have been through the toughest part of our journey.” Given that many of the discussions may bring up new memories or reactions, the audience was advised to seek an Elder or another trusted person in the audience.

In **telling their personal stories**, Tina spoke of her grandfather who was an Olympian in 1912, one of only two Indigenous athletes at the time. And Waneek spoke of the strength of her mom who raised four girls on her own. The girls became a physician, actor, professional athlete and professor.

Andrea – a member of the **NAFC youth executive** – introduced Justice Murray Sinclair by stating she feels the duty to take on the reconciliation work, which she wants to do, but she also asked the room for help; to share their stories; to be assured that the history is not forgotten but that there are new ideas and innovations yet to be realized.

After being honoured at an event the evening before, the room was treated to another presentation by **Justice Murray Sinclair**.

He alluded to chaos theory but was encouraged that this room “**came together to reset ourselves**” and that we must commit to doing it again and again, and to checking in on our vision, and adjust as necessary. That, indeed, innovation sometimes means evoking our old ways and thinking about how we can re-use them in new contexts.

He told an engaging tale about how as a young lawyer he was working on the **repatriation of the constitution** and his efforts to engage Elders in this work. After making a presentation, he sat back to see how the Elders could help him in his work. At the break he was set on the right path by the organizer.

“It’s not about them fitting into what you presented, it’s about you listening to what they have to say,” said the organizer. After **two days** of listening he was directed to “take our constitution to them and get them to understand us.”

He recoiled, as he felt he was not “trained or educated” on how to do this, and he then set about to leave the legal profession and return to carpentry.

But one more consultation with an Elder saw him get back on course. He learned that his education was only partially completed. That the legal education may have been done, but he had yet to learn how to be Anishnaabe; to be a good husband; to be a good father. “This is who you are (always) and your time as a lawyer is only one part of that,” said the Elder.

Justice Sinclair told the Summit attendees: you must **make decisions based on your purpose** and who you want to be, and if that comes in conflict with your formal education, go with your teachings, go with your people.

Raven and Paul Lacerte then took to the stage to discuss their **Moose Hide Campaign**, which was inspired by the white ribbon campaign but with a focus on ending violence against Aboriginal women and children.

Raven’s talk was moving. She spoke about the experience of her mother, a residential school warrior, who suffered long-term consequences.

She told the story of going with her father to hunt a moose, skinning it and then cutting the leather into small squares – **25,000 of them** – for men to wear. This is meant to be a conversation starter about how we value and treat Aboriginal women in our country

and ultimately a way to end the violence. Their goal is to distribute 1 million squares; they have already distributed 100,000.

Paul, her father, asked us **do we have a Raven in our lives and if so, are we doing enough to keep her safe?** He urged us to create a new healing journey; practice intimacy and vulnerability; and make new spaces between children and parents that enable us reclaiming the relationships that were shattered.

He urged the men in the room not to fear the independence of the women in their lives and he issued a **challenge** for 1 million men to join him in a fast.

In the provocatively entitled “**dark side of social innovation**,” Tim Draimin spoke about unintended consequences; user mal-intentions; and the value of end-user input when developing social innovations.

Dan McCarthy of WISIR acknowledged his role as a **translator** between the worlds of complexity and social innovation; the concept of “bounded rationality” and the importance of environmental stewardship, while acknowledging his privilege and humility.

Elder Peter encouraged us to “acknowledge yet not welcome the dark side.” He spoke of the **gulf between new ideas and old wisdom** and encouraged us to be ever vigilant in keeping an eye on the consequences of our actions.

In speaking about **social spaces**, we learned about the critical work of Friendship Centres that create welcoming environments with trust and love that ultimately lead to social innovation.

Tonya Surman of the **Centre for Social Innovation** talked about creating spaces for love to emerge. The centre she has helped create is actually a space to forge community, which evolves into community capital, which they were able to turn into a community bond to fund their building. Their work in facilitating connections involves **revealing assets** in the eco-system through salad clubs, community summits and solutions circles, wherein people are encouraged to bring in self-interest to create collective interest.

Paul Lacerte spoke about his experience on the **B.C. Social Innovation Council** and how this multi-sectoral group was able to work together to create 11 recommendations they could all agree on. It wasn't easy. The urgency of their task, the egos and the resulting anxiety often split the group but they had hope in the promise of social innovation. One way they broke down silos between the for-profit and not-for-profit sector was through the creation of hybrid corporate legislation.

Paul encouraged us to **create loving spaces** in which to work and live. He and his team tried to create the most loving workplace any of them had ever worked in, based

on the belief that love is the medicine they need. Paul clearly asserts that this culture of love led to more efficiency and effectiveness.

And at home the children were asked what they want their house to be – **a house of happiness** they decreed – and it became known as exactly that. Not the Lacerte house but the house of happiness.

We then heard from social innovation thought leader, Frances Westley. Frances made the links between what’s happening on the ground and at the global level. She encouraged us to consider four ways of reaching.

- **Reach out.** Where good ideas come from; the adjacent possible; bricolage; and engagement of unusual suspect.
- **Reach up and down.** Prepare for opportunities to create a transformation; keeping our feet in the earth/ hands to the sky.
- **Reach deep.** Building on the old valuing our rich culture and connecting the past to the future. She told a personal story of depression in her family and how Elders advised her that an absence of soul comes about “when you can’t tell your story”. The treatment is not DSM categorizing but storytelling.
- **Reach with care.** Reflect on why you do what you do. To do what calls to you and with people you care about. Not to expect perfection and to set boundaries for yourself; and finally to let yourself be surprised and welcome abundance.

As always there were words of wisdom among the attendee -- not just on stage. For example I heard: after attending this event, “my Canada is bigger”; “how could I not know that listening is a superpower?”; “my presence is enough”; and one that particularly resonated with me: tears are not about “losing it” but rather “getting it.”

Sheila Rogers of the CBC interviewed two young leaders and spoke about the spaces between us and the importance of sharing our stories. As I reflect on her last point about storytelling as a generous act, I hope this has helped you capture some of the elements that made this event a magical one with an impact that will live well beyond our time together in Winnipeg.

Future summits, participating in the Moose Hide campaign, living loving, generous lives are all ways we can keep this work going.

Thank you,

Allyson Hewitt