The Spirit of Haudenosaunee Youth: The Transformation of Identity and Well-being Through Culture-based Activism

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THE SPIRIT OF HAUDENOSAUNEE YOUTH:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY AND WELL-BEING THROUGH
CULTURE-BASED ACTIVISM

by

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the connection between Indigenous knowledge and culture-based action, and how this connection facilitates a sense of identity and well-being for Haudenosaunee youth. This study examines the experience of fourteen Haudenosaunee youth and five parents/adults as they ran for four summers (2005-2008) on a youth-led spiritual journey known as the Unity Run. On this journey youth travelled throughout Haudenosaunee traditional territory (Ontario and Quebec, Canada; and New York State, U.S.A.) and beyond (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee) carrying a message of peace, unity and social justice.

The methodology of this research is framed within Haudenosaunee traditional protocols (visiting and sharing stories) and philosophies such as the Kayanaren’kó:wa (The Great Law of Peace), Tekéni Teyohà:ke Kahswénhtake (Two Row Wampum), and Ohenton Karihwashtó:ken (The Words Before All Else) to understand the perspective and position which these Haudenosaunee youth took with the Unity journey. The research questions sought to facilitate understanding of the nature of culture-based activism, youth motivation, and the transformation of identity and well-being through this spiritual journey. The findings from this research suggest that culture-based activism among Native youth is not only a means towards social justice; it re-connects Native youth to the cultural knowledge, skills and pride of their people. This study resulted in an understanding of the importance of Native youth re-uniting with a cultural consciousness by physically running through their traditional land and territories, as well as hearing their authentic Indigenous history. The Unity Run provided participating youth with
healing which contributed to the positive transformations in their identity, as well
promoted healthy well-being as these youth transitioned into Haudenosaunee young
adults.

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my grandparents who have passed on to the spiritual world. I also want to thank my two
brothers, Mathew and Nathan; we continue to struggle individually and as a family with
what we have been born into. I pray that you both find peace and healing through our
culture. The hardships each of you has endured in your lives while in this physical world
were not in vain. You all taught me love, strength, compassion and the importance of
family. Our journeys together in this life have taught me about the lineage of our people
and how this impacts all of our lives. More importantly, the pain which you all have
endured in your lives does not have to continue. This dissertation is for all of us to learn,
heal and move forward without forgetting.

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Dedication

This dissertation is for 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 as long as 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 research and dissertation to our youth and to our future generations to come—may you always strive for peace, unity and justice!
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Ohenton Karihwatehkwen¹ - The Words Before All Else
Kenyen’keha (Mohawk) and English

Sewatahonhsiyohst ken’nikarihwesha sewakwekon
Listen very carefully everyone for a short time.

Ne kati; tenshitewanonheraton’ne Shonkwaya’tison
So then we will offer our greetings to the Creator.

Tayethinonhweronhseke ne Onkwe’shoná. Etho Kati nenyohtonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.
We continue to offer our greetings to all the people. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweronhseke ne Yethi’nihstenha tsi yonhwetsyate. Etho kati nenyohtonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.
We continue to offer our greetings to the Earth, Our Mother. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweronhseke ne Kahnekahronnyon. Etho kati nenyohtonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.
We continue to offer our greetings to the waters of all the rivers, lakes and streams. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweronhseke ne Kentsyon’shoná. Etho kati nenyohtonhake ne onkwa’nikonre.
We continue to offer our greetings to all of the fish life. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweronhseke ne Yathontonni. Etho kati nenyohtonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.
We continue to offer our greetings to all the medicine. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweronhseke ne Otsi’nonwa’shoná. Etho kati nenyohtonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.
We continue to offer our greetings to all the insect life. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweronhseke ne Tyonnhehkwen. Etho kati nenyohtonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

¹ Kanonhweronhtshera (Enos Williams thowenninekén:’on) longer version in Kenyen’keha (Mohawk) and English, also known as the Thanksgiving Address.
We continue to offer our greetings to all the different natural foods. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Wahyaniyontha. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to all the fruit. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Kontiriyo. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to all the animals. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Tsi’ten’okoná. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to all the birds. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Karonta’okoná. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to all the trees. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Tyowerawenrye. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to all the winds. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Yethisotha Ahsontenhnekha wehohe’tarayatyes. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to our Grandmother Moon. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Etshitewahtsi’a entyehkene karahkwa. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to our Elder Brother, the Sun. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Yotsihstohkwahronnyon. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to all of the Stars. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

Tayethinonhweratonhseke ne Shonkwaya’tison. Etho kati nenyohonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.

We continue to offer our greetings to the Creator. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.
At every ceremony and most meetings, the Haudenosaunee start with the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen, also known as the Thanksgiving Address (Thomas, 1988) or “The Words that Come Before all Else.” It is told by our Haudenosaunee Knowledge Keepers that this first speech/ceremony was put in place after the Creator produced life and bestowed responsibilities upon each living and spiritual entity upon the earth. The speech is a humbling process for humans in “bringing our minds together” to acknowledge our responsibility and gratefulness to the Creator, to all the living entities upon the earth, to the spirit world for their duties, and for everything that has been provided on earth to sustain all life (Thomas, 1988). The late Cayuga Chief Jacob Thomas (1988) explains the significance of this speech to the Haudenosaunee People:

This address, which can take several hours to recite, is an acknowledgement of the full circle of Creation. It is a central prayer among the Iroquois and considered a foundation to everything in human life, including the Great Law of Peace. An ancient custom, the address is given to help human beings living in society to achieve what the Iroquois call “one-mindedness.” From the basis of that perception, in the traditional Indian view, a human gathering can be set to work consensually toward unanimity. (p. 2)

This particular version of the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen in the Kenyen’keha (Mohawk Language) and English languages is a very short version from the Bay of Quinte Mohawk

I begin this dissertation with the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen to offer thanks to the Creator and all living and spiritual entities. I am also thankful for the opportunity that I had to work alongside Haudenosaunee youth to understand their perspectives on a journey which stood for social justice and cultural resurgence. The Ohenton Karihwatehkwen also reminds me of how the youth started their day each morning during the Unity Run to ensure that “all our minds were together” and in a “good place” as we proceeded forward with our travel for that day. It is my hope that by starting with the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen the reader will journey through the experiences and stories of this research and share in discovering what can be learned from our Haudenosaunee youth about their experience on a spiritual journey, about culture-based activism and about working positively with youth and Indigenous-focused research.

Before we begin delving into the research with the Spirit of the Youth and the Unity Run, it is within Onkwehonwe protocol that I share who I am and the context in which I seek to understand and learn from our young people.

**A Journey of Self and Relevance in Seeking Knowledge**

If anyone tried to tell me last year that I would be on a three and half week journey on horseback in Saskatchewan, I would have laughed in their face. That is not something that Bonnie Freeman would have done. I am a responsible workaholic—there is nothing else but work.
In 1995 I was invited with two other students to embark on a journey on horseback with members of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people of the North American plains. At the time, I did not know the extent to which this experience would impact my life, my identity as an Onkwehonwe woman and my work with Native young people.

My Indian name is *Nenookaasi* (Anishnabe) which refers to the “bird that hovers,” also known as the Hummingbird. In Kenyen’keha:ka (Mohawk) Hummingbird translates to *Roanroan*, which mimics the sound of the flapping wings of the Hummingbird. I am an Algonquin/Mohawk, Bear Clan woman who is a band member of the Six Nations Reserve #40 and I reside with my son among my father’s people, the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Ontario, Canada. I have not always known what my identity as an Onkwehonwe person meant, and how that identity connected with the Haudenosaunee culture. Growing up in the United States in the small suburban town of Greece, New York, I always knew that I was “Indian.” I saw the Native attributes and resemblance within my family and within myself. But as a family we did not ever talk about what it was like to be “Indian.” From my experience with my parents, I learned at a young age that it was not good to identify myself as “Indian” let alone talk about it. I remember being in Girl Scouts as a young girl and throughout the year we would work on our badges. At one meeting, the Scout Leader came up to me to ask if my parents would come and talk with the group about being
“Indian.” I remember being excited, because this would be the first time I would hear about who I am as an “Indian.” When my father came to pick me up, I ran over to the car very excited and said to him, “Dad, can you come to our Girl Scout meeting next week and talk about being ‘Indian’!?” My father looked at me with a stern look and said, “No, I will not talk about that. Get in the car.” The Girl Scout Leader came over to the car and asked my father if he could talk with the group, and again he said “no.” When I heard my father say “no” to me as well as the Girl Scout Leader, I felt very sad and ashamed of being who I was. I wondered why it was so bad to be “Indian” or why we could not speak about being who we are. I never did bring that question or any other questions about who I was as an “Indian” to my parents for as long as they lived. This is not to say, however, that I abandoned my search to learn who I was as a Native person. Even as a young girl, I knew that I would come back and live among my people. I had to find out who I was, and what happened to my parents to make them so silent regarding their Native heritage and to not want to acknowledge who they were as Native persons. My parents harboured a lot of pain and sadness due to their experiences growing up as Native persons on the reserve. I remember visiting my parents when I was a child while they were hospitalized in a Mental Health Ward. I wished at that time I could understand or even take away that deep-seated pain. My parents’ experiences and their inability to understand, speak and feel good about themselves, profoundly affected how my siblings and I felt about ourselves while growing up.

When I look back at some of the pictures of my sister and myself, I observe a number of things. As a child I had the darker skin and darker hair; my sister’s hair and skin were much fairer. Because I was darker I always had my hair cut short, where my
sister’s hair was always long and flowing. I also notice in those pictures that my mother dressed my sister and I in uniform-style clothes; this style of clothes may have been what many children wore for pictures at that time, but I also think it had a lot to do with my mother’s upbringing. I remember dreading the times when I had to get my hair washed as it was these times when my mother would scrub our heads hard in her attempt to remove the imaginary bugs from our hair. I also remember my mother’s house being immaculately clean, a responsibility which fell upon my sister and I to learn as “girl’s work.”

My father was a good man when he was sober. He worked hard and was a good provider. However, when he drank he became very angry and sad at the same time. There were times this anger was taken out on my mother. While he was beating her I could hear her crying and calling me to help. These violent times instilled a paralyzing fear within me, to where I could not move from my bed. There were other times when my father would be so drunk he cried because he missed his father or said to me that my sister and one younger brother were adopted.

As a child I had to live trying to anticipate how my parents would react to each other or to us as children. As the oldest of three other siblings, I tried very hard to be a “good child.” I found escape from my home life in the activities at school. One activity I enjoyed was choir. There were many times when I had to stay after school to practice or participate in the annual evening concerts. I would be the only student who did not have their parents present during practice or the concerts. I also enjoyed traveling to my mother’s reserve, Kitigan Zibi which is an Algonquin reserve adjacent to and part of the town of Maniwaki, Quebec. These annual trips would last from one to two weeks and
would provide sheltered glimpses into my mother’s Native family. When I was there I felt protected and loved hearing my grandmother’s stories. My grandparents worked very close to the land; my grandfather fished, hunted, and trapped. There were many times when children were not allowed into the basement because my grandfather would be cleaning an animal. My grandfather’s first language was Algonquin. He explained to me how he had to teach himself French and English by studying the various street signs around the town. My grandmother, who was of French descent, grew up on a farm and on the land in Quebec. She spent much of her time foraging for berries and other wild fruits to make preserves, and she was known on the reserve for her homemade bread. As I got older, I remembered my grandmother always having a pot of soup on the stove and at lunchtime many people would come by to eat and discuss community politics and activities with my grandparents. My parents and grandparents did not have a “traditional” Native upbringing or lifestyle, which involved participating in ceremonies.

When I was fourteen, my father died as a passenger in an alcohol-related car accident in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. At the time of my father’s death my parents were divorced. However his death hit me hard and marked the start of my journey to learn about myself. My mother sent me up to my grandparents’ in Kitigan Zibi where I spent the whole summer. My aunt worked in a craft shop across the street from my grandparents’ house. One day she invited me to come to work with her, and that’s when I learned to bead and make crafts from the material in the shop. The Native woman who ran the shop decided she would buy the items that I made to sell to provide me with some spending money. I loved that job. I loved observing and listening to the community members who would stop by and visit. We laughed, we learned the latest gossip on the
reserve and I was proudly introduced as the granddaughter of John Lambert and Olive Cayer, and the daughter of Deena. I felt proud to be a part of my mother’s community; along with this pride was a sense of belonging. By the time summer came to an end I had to go home, but I didn’t want to.

This experience left a lasting impression. When I turned sixteen I got my driver’s license and bought a car with the inheritance my father left me. Every couple of months I would drive eight hours to Kitigan Zibi to visit with my grandparents. I thought of various reasons to visit my grandparents. In my senior year of high school I decided to do a project on the education of the Native children from Kitigan Zibi reserve in the school system of Maniwaki. For a high school student (in the late ‘70s), I was very critical of how Native children were being taught. I think that this stemmed from my own desire to have a Native language and cultural teachings. My project recommended that the Algonquin language and culture be taught to Native children attending schools in the town of Maniwaki. While I was working on this project, I remember sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea with my grandparents and talking about how many of the older people on the reserve were suffering because of poverty. It was sometime during this trip that I was speaking with an Elder, when he told me, “What you do and say today will have an effect on the future generations.” What seemed to be a simple saying was so complex and confounding. The Elder’s words have remained with me and guide my actions to this day. Before I left my grandparents, I decided I would have a meeting with the Band Council Chief. When I met with him I brought up many of the concerns that my grandparents and others expressed regarding the care of our Elders and asked the Chief how he was going to help. I explained to him that many were going without food
and heat, and some Elders did not have family members to assist with their daily living. I believe the Chief was quite shocked that such a young person had significant concerns which aligned with our Native values. When I returned to my grandparents a few months later, I heard about all the changes the Chief and Council were making to assist the Elders within the community. This made me very happy.

I did not move to the Six Nations Reserve until I was twenty-nine years old, my son was seven and I was about to start the Native Community Care Program at Mohawk College. It was not until this point that I possessed the confidence to think I could accomplish a post-secondary education. My parents did not go to college or university. My mother was lucky to achieve at best a grade three education and I’m not sure what grade my father was able to achieve in his school years. I realized that I needed to go back to school when the grocery store I worked for passed over my application and twelve years of experience to hire a man who possessed a bachelor degree and no prior experience for the position of Assistant Deli Manager. I was upset. I then applied and was accepted into the Indian Social Work program at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan. I was packed up and about to leave for university when a representative from Indian and Northern Affairs requested that I attend a meeting at their office in Brantford, Ontario. I was told by the person at Indian Affairs that they were refusing to pay for my tuition and living allowance for the Indian Social Work program. This worker told me that Indian Affairs wanted me to attend the Native Community Care Program through Mohawk College and that I had to withdraw from the University of Regina and apply to Mohawk College. For the longest time I was upset with Indian Affairs and felt their decision set me back. Yet, it was the Native Community Care
program and the Indigenous Studies Program at McMaster University that assisted me in building connections and relationships within my father’s community, as well as provided an opportunity to learn more about myself as an Onkwehonwe woman and a citizen of the Haudenosaunee people.

It was not until I started taking Indigenous Studies courses that I learned about Residential Schools. I later learned from one of my aunts that my mother, her older sister and her brothers attended a number of Residential Schools until they were finally sent to the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Kenora, Ontario. My mother and her siblings would not talk much about their experience at any of the Residential Schools they attended. While I don’t know the hardships, abuses, traumas they may have experienced or if they had any good experiences during their attendance in any of the Residential Schools, I do feel that I may have experienced some of the residual effects my mother had experienced during her years in attendance there.

I really don’t know much about my father’s life on the reserve. I know his life was hard and he loved his parents. One thing that my father’s sisters speak about is how my grandfather, Henry Lickers, was able to speak fluently at least five of the Haudenosaunee languages. My aunts expressed how my grandfather refused to teach his children to speak any of the “Indian” languages, not wanting his children to experience the harsh repercussions of speaking “Indian.” My father’s mother could not teach her children to speak “Indian” because she became deaf after acquiring scarlet fever as a young girl. When I hear my aunties speak about growing up, they talk about how their father wanted to protect his children from feeling the consequences of being “Indian.”
He encouraged his children to seek the “White man” ways. I think out of all his children, my father and one of his brothers were the only ones who married Native spouses.

My experience as a Native woman, as well as my academic education, have greatly contributed to my understanding of collective trauma (Krieg, 2009; O’Loughlin, 2009; Stamm et al., 2004; Duran and Duran, 1995; Duran et al., 1998) and the social problems that contribute to the depression and poor mental health among generations of First Nations people. However, it is not the academic knowledge or theories through which we attempt to recognize human behaviour that have led me to my journey of learning my Native identity. My childhood fed my attempts to understand the deep sadness and pain both my parents experienced and carried throughout their lives, and I sought ways to help other Native people who harbour the same sadness and pain within their lives. I believe by incorporating Onkwehonwe teachings and cultural values and practices within our lives we as Native people will find strength, happiness and Sken:nen (Peace). The strength of Onkwehonwe culture is the foundation that supports the resilience of First Nations peoples to uphold, protect and maintain their cultural identities, knowledges, and connections to the land that are distinctive to the original occupants of North America.

I have had the opportunity to participate in Native community-based healing initiatives such as, the “Mending the Sacred Hoop – Big Foot Memorial” ride in 1995 and the “Unity Ride” in 1995, 1996, 2004, and 2005, which we travelled on horseback and foot across the land from one Native reservation to the next in Canada and the United States. During these Rides, we shared the importance of traditional knowledge and practices in making changes for ourselves, our families, and our communities. Through
these experiences I have gained a sense of pride and respect in my identity as a Native woman, as well as a sense of cultural connectedness and well-being by living on the land as part of a collective group which depended on the relationships we nurtured and maintained while on these journeys. The Unity Rides and Runs resulted in many positive personal transformations, including a sense of pride and self-esteem for those who participated. These experiences brought a sense of purpose, understanding, belonging and hope as our actions in the present connected us to our ancestral past while helping to preserve our culture, language, ceremonies and natural environment for our future generations.

I ask you to join me as I share a journey of knowledge-seeking involving learning, understanding, and trusting our own selves as we come to a place of discovery and knowing.

A Note Regarding Language and Terminology

This dissertation represents a bridge between the cultural knowledge of our past and present and future generations. I feel it is important not only for young people who are searching for their identity, a sense of belonging and a connection to their culture, but also for those who are unaware or uneducated about the “original occupants” of North America. It is imperative to use terminology which supports and encourages the pride and respect of Indigenous peoples. I also understand and feel it is important to acknowledge that many Native families and communities continue to choose terminology that identifies themselves within the context of their own culture, or use terms defined by
the government, or use phrases that have been passed down over generations. Native people are at a point where reclaiming their identity is an essential component in their healing. For this reason, I leave that journey to them—to discover who they are and find peace and comfort within their own being. Yet I find myself in the position of feeling a sense of responsibility for highlighting those terms and/or phrases which would not be appropriate to use when referring to the Indigenous peoples of North America.

In Canada, there are a number of words that Indigenous or the “Original People” have used to identify themselves, or were contrived in defining or labeling a “people.” Words such as Aboriginal, First Nations, Indian, Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabe, Cayuga, Métis, Cree, Inuit, Ojibwa, Native, Kanien’keha, etc. - the list is long and extensive. In the United States, Indigenous people have been referred to as Native Americans, Native American Indians or by their Nation, such as the Seneca Nation or the Lakota Nation. Many of these titles are appropriate when referring to a particular nation of people; however many are not. There are many words and phrases which continue to perpetuate misconceptions and generalizations of Indigenous people including those which stereotype or romanticize, thus perpetuating the status quo in keeping Native people invisible or at the margins of our society.

The word “Aboriginal” has been created by the Canadian government (Alfred, 2005; Freeman, 2005) to refer to the three distinct groups of Indigenous peoples within Canada: the First Nations People, the Métis and the Inuit. The problem with the term “Aboriginal” is that it creates the impression of a “melting pot” or homogenizing of three groups of Indigenous ancestry into one group, thereby dismissing the distinctness of each particular Indigenous nation. In doing so, the Canadian government disregards the
sovereignty and autonomy which each nation of people has possessed since their creation on this earth. Within Canada, the First Nations people represent over 500 various Indigenous groups who are diverse in language and cultural knowledge and practices.

The Métis are defined by their mixed heritage of First Nations and European backgrounds, two cultural heritages that have resulted in a people with a distinct language and culture. The Inuit are the Indigenous people who live in the northern region of North America; their language, culture and way of life is a reflection of the land, water and ice they live upon (Freeman, 2005). While many of these terms are contested at various levels, they continue to be used interchangeably to define and explain the original people of North America. It is not my intention with this dissertation to solve, challenge or dispute these terms. Nonetheless, I would prefer to use terms that are used and are familiar to my community.

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 particular nation, such as Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) or Kenyen’keha (Mohawk nation). They also use terms such as Onkwehonwe (Real People) or Anishnaabe (Original People) to refer to themselves as the original, indigenous people of the land. However, it is offensive for a non-Native person to refer to an Indigenous person as an “Indian,” due to the negative labels and stereotypical images that have been evoked by this term from the time of early settlers to the current day. When Native people formally or informally introduce themselves, they will identify themselves with their nation, the land and territory of their people, their clan and their Onkwehonwe name (Freeman, 2007). It also

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must be noted that most Native people refer to their communities or groups of Native people as “My People” or “The People.”

In this dissertation I will use the word “Aboriginal” sparingly because of the problems with this term in essentializing (Paradies, 2006; Alfred, 2005) the identity and nations of Indigenous, Métis and Inuit peoples under one defined government term and structure (Garrouette, 2003; Lawrence, 2010). I prefer to use the following words throughout this document: Indigenous, Native, First Nations, Haudenosaunee, and/or Onkwehonwe. As well, when appropriate I will acknowledge the particular nation to which people belong.

I would also like to note that the first time I mention the names of Indigenous authors or Elders within this document, I will reference them with both their first and last names. This indicates respect for the uniqueness of the persons and the knowledge they have shared through their written words.
Chapter 1 – Introduction


It is with gratitude that I acknowledge our meeting and that you are at peace and in good health. I am called Roan:roan (Hummingbird) and I am from the People of the Flint (Mohawk Nation) and Algonquin from the clan “that eats honey” (Bear clan). I am from the “place where they have council,” Ohsweken, Ontario. I work at McMaster University and learn at Wilfrid Laurier. My mother is Diana Cayer from Kitigen Zibi, Quebec and my father is Kenny Lickers from Ohsweken.

In many Native communities and territories, it is a customary protocol to extend greetings and introduce “one’s self to those you come to meet as a way to provide one’s cultural location, so that a connection can be made on a political, cultural and social grounds” (Martin, 2003, p.2), as well as to commence the establishment of relationship (Martin, 2003; Absolon, 2011). This dissertation is a journey for me on a wholistic\textsuperscript{3} level

\textsuperscript{2} My original Onkwehonwe name was given to me from the Anishnabé in a naming ceremony. The name which was given to me is Nenookaasi, which refers to the “bird that hovers” or also known as the Hummingbird. In 2008, I had my Onkwehonwe name translated into Kenyen’keha:ka (Mohawk) for the purpose of ceremonies as I was undergoing treatment for stage 4 colon cancer.

\textsuperscript{3} Indigenous social work scholar, Cyndy Baskin (2011) discusses in her book Strong Helpers’ Teachings: The Value of Indigenous Knowledge in Helping the difference between the terms “wholistic” and “holistic.”
(physical, mental, emotional and spiritual) as I seek to understand Indigenous knowledge and research beyond a Western and intellectual realm, by centering this study’s investigation and its findings through the means of Indigenous epistemology. To do so, I started this chapter with my greetings to the reader to locate and centralize my identity and standpoint as an Indigenous scholar. Indigenous research, theory and knowledge, and ways of knowing have always been central for Indigenous people in surviving, discovering and sharing knowledge of the land, animals, plants, and natural environment, and understanding the importance of relationships between human beings and these natural entities (Wilson, 2008; Absolon, 2011). Indigenous scholar Leanne R. Simpson (2004) defines Indigenous knowledge as coming:

from the land through the relationships Indigenous Peoples develop and foster with the essential forces of nature. These relationships are encoded in the structure of Indigenous languages and in Indigenous political and spiritual systems. They are practiced in traditional forms of governance, and they are lived in the hearts and minds of Indigenous Peoples. (2004, p. 378)

The type of knowledge and philosophy which Simpson (2004) articulates transpires in various forms. For Native people the form of storytelling, narration or the interjection of

Baskin refers to Renee Linklater’s notion of “wholism” as an “all encompassing term.” Linklater shares that Elders explained to her that the term “holism” refers “to what is holy”, and therefore can be linked to the “paternalistic ideas of power and force.” Also, Baskin shares Linklater’s reference to participant’s idea that “holism” is “an empty space word” (Baskin, 2011, p. 107-108). Despite Linklater’s argument between the two spellings and meanings, Baskin decides to use the term “holistic” throughout her book to refer to: 1) the four aspects of a person; 2) the interconnectivity with creation; 3) the interdependence with family and community; and 4) healing (p. 108). In this dissertation, I will use the term “wholistic” to refer to what is “all encompassing” (Baskin, 2011, p. 107) as it relates to the four areas outlined by Baskin.
life experiences when explaining or sharing imperative moments to others allows the listener or reader, as well as the individual conveying the information, to connect with the material in a way that is relevant and non-intrusive to all (Archibald, 2008).

My academic work is guided by an exploration and a validation of Indigenous perspectives centred on Haudenosaunee knowledge and incorporating concepts such as the “good mind”4 which conveys the tenets of peace, power (the power of the good mind), and righteousness (the strength of having a good mind and being at peace) from the Great Law of Peace. From these tenets, we begin to understand the importance of an ancient system of knowledge which contributes to Indigenous self-determination, sovereignty, mobilization, resiliency and agency. This traditional knowledge also contributes to a strong sense of identity, as well as to the wholistic health and well-being of Indigenous people (Alfred, 2005). However, over generations Aboriginal people have been afflicted by many political and social injustices as a result of colonization which have contributed to the collapse of some aspects of Native culture (Memmi, 1991; Freire, 2000). Therefore, to understand the resiliency and agency of Aboriginal people, it is important to briefly explore the historical and social injustices which have suppressed and marginalized Native people for generations (Oetzel & Duran, 2004; Gone, 2007; Champagne, 1994; Farley et al., 2005; Gagné, 1998; Ladner, 2008).

I have centered this dissertation in a framework of Indigenous knowledge and experiences in order to understand an Indigenous perspective through a Haudenosaunee

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4 The “good mind” is a Haudenosaunee philosophical concept based within the Great Law of Peace (Goodmindedness, Peacefulness and Strength). Haudenosaunee scholar Brenda LaFrance along with James Costello (2010) define the concept of the “good mind” and the philosophical importance within the Haudenosaunee worldview: “Goodmindedness stems from using a pure mind in all interactions with the natural world, including other people. Peacefulness flows from being in a state of Goodmindedness, and Strength comes from having Goodmindedness and Peacefulness. Thus a state of Goodmindedness allows a sense of peacefulness to spread across the land, while creating the strength to continue our ceremonies and offer our thanksgiving to the Creator” (p. 63).
lens, a lens which is used to reveal self-determination, cultural resiliency and empowerment as it pertains to First Nations people (Wilson, 2004). Such a lens conveys Indigenous philosophies as the legitimate knowledge of a people which has been long misunderstood and misinterpreted by colonialists (Battiste, 2005). This framework supports an understanding which has been cultivated by many Native youth groups in carrying out community-based initiatives. Some of these initiatives have been structured, within a spiritual and cultural framework, to (re)claim culture, identity and well-being through culture-based activism (Alfred, 2005).

The Aim of this Dissertation

This thesis aims to examine and analyze the connection between Indigenous knowledge and activism, and how this connection facilitates a sense of identity, well-being and purpose for Native youth who participated in a culture-based activity known as the Unity Run. I decided to focus this research on Native youth due to my experience and upbringing as a Native youth and woman who had little connection or understanding of who I was as a Native person. I also wanted to seek out Native cultural practices, experiences and knowledge which would contribute to and reinforce a positive Native identity and well-being for my son and his peers who were confronted with few outlets and services for Native youth in our community.

By establishing Indigenous knowledge as its central theoretical foundation, the voices of Indigenous people will be represented with integrity and will not be lost in the translation or transference of knowledge from one perspective to another. This connection between Indigenous knowledge and activism will be examined by exploring
the efforts taken by Native youth to (re)connect to their cultural knowledge and epistemology, thereby contributing to a sense of purpose, health and well-being through culture-based activism. In addition, I will incorporate western theoretical notions to support and highlight an Indigenous perspective. In doing so, I will provide an Indigenous perspective on the discipline of social work, which will result in understanding the efforts of self-determination by Indigenous peoples, their seeking social justice for their inherent rights as peoples, and how such efforts contribute to the identity and well-being of Onkwehonwe people (Absolon & Willett, 2005, Freeman, 2007).

Problems Confronting First Nations Youth

For many generations, First Nations people have experienced substantial oppression and social injustice as a result of policies of colonization and assimilation, leaving families and communities frustrated, depressed, full of anger, and hopeless (McKenzie & Morrissett, 2003; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Thomas & Bellefeuille, 2006; Dillard & Manson, 2000; Government of Canada, R.C.A.P., 2006; Duran and Duran, 1995; Ball, 1998; Hill, Antone and Myers, 1980; Robin et al., 1996; Mason et al., 1996; Gagné, 1998; Lederman, 1999; Duran et al., 1998; Morrissette et al., 1993; Freeman, 2005; Quinn, 2007). According to the Statistical Profile on the Health of First Nations in Canada Report (2003), First Nations people under the age of thirty years make up over half (55-60%) of the total Aboriginal population. As the population of First Nations people continues to increase, so do many of the issues and problems Native youth are facing. The Report by 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 demoralizing conditions have contributed to increased substance abuse, suicide and violence, and fatalities among Aboriginal children and youth (White Bear, 2003; Olson & Wahab, 2006; Strickland et al., 2006; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Various reports have indicated that suicides amongst Native youth are five to six times higher than the national average (White, 2005; First Nations & Inuit Health, 2003). Indigenous scholar Barbara Waterfall (2002) recognizes 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 very frightening is that the age at which Native youth are attempting suicide has become younger and younger. In 2007, a ten-year-old Six Nations child\(^5\) took their own life (Six Nations), and from 2010 to 2011 the Haudenosaunee community of Six Nations experienced a great number of young people who took their own lives.

Along with the high rates of trauma and violence in many First Nations communities, youth have limited outlets and services by which to express their frustrations and pain (First Nations & Inuit Health, 2003). Communities such as Davis Inlet have witnessed addiction and gas/glue sniffing among their youth (Press, 1995). In 2005, the school shootings that occurred in the Native community of Red Lake, Minnesota had a tremendous impact on many people across the United States and Canada (CBC News, 2005). Incidents such as these leave communities and social service

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\(^5\) Out of respect to the family of this child, I will not refer to the name of this deceased child.
organizations questioning the fragmentation of policies and services that are supposed to help Aboriginal people.

During the development of this study, a few members of the Native youth group known as The Spirit of the Youth Working Group located at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Ontario, Canada read and responded to the research I was proposing. Although the overall response was positive, the criticism these youth did provide was that they did not like how I framed Native 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, etc. My response to these youth was that I agreed and acknowledged their concern and said: “To understand what is happening with some Aboriginal 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 as not saying.” I explained to them that I did not want to replicate the same approach to research which continues to perpetuate a colonial and stereotypical perspective of dysfunction and un-wellness among Aboriginal youth (Smith, 1999). I shared that I wanted to exemplify through my research the strength and resiliency which Onkwehonwe youth possess by means of culture-based activism. The youth expressed their respect for my position, but wanted me to assure them that I would highlight the good things in what they are doing. I agreed!

The Resiliency of First Nations Youth
There are a number of Native youth across North America incorporating their cultural knowledge in an effort to bring positive changes to their demoralizing living conditions, as well bring awareness to the historical injustices which have impacted their communities over generations. These Native youth have organized and implemented community and culture-based ventures such as The Seventh Generation Rides (Lakota Youth on horseback, 1996 to present), Unity Runs (Six Nations Haudenosaunee Spirit of the Youth Working Group, 2004 to 2011), and Youth Rallies and Walks across North America (Protecting our Mother - Kenora Anishnaabe Youth Walk to Toronto, 2008 to 2012; and the 2013 Nishiyuu Walk to Ottawa ) (CBC, 2008-2013). This dissertation is focused on the agency and resiliency which Onkwehonwe youth possess in taking a stand for Indigenous justice for their families, communities, future generations, as well as for the future of Mother Earth and our natural environment.

I have been graced with the opportunity to participate in some of these community-based ventures. As a result of my participation, 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 mobilizes 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 of our purpose, and a sense of hope and well-being. These inherent knowledge and rights reach deep down through the problems and issues of colonization, oppression and marginalization and reawaken the foundation of who we are as Onkwehonwe people.
This research study is focused on a group of Haudenosaunee youth from Six Nations who formed The Spirit of the Youth Working Group. This group of youth undertook a spiritual commitment and five-year journey known as the Unity Run which travelled and brought together Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous communities through their message of peace and unity and through the Youth and Elders Declarations for Indigenous justice (see appendix 1 and 2). The next section presents the formation and history of The Spirit of the Youth Working Group.

**The Spirit of the Youth (SOY)**

During the International Elders Gathering in 2004 held at Six Nations, Ontario, approximately twenty Haudenosaunee youth from the Six Nations community formed the group, The Spirit of the Youth Working Group (also known as The Spirit of the Youth or SOY). Their mission was to journey over a period of four years, traveling on foot (running and walking) and sharing the Haudenosaunee message of Peace and Unity; in addition they would advocate improving the quality of life for all Indigenous peoples across Canada and the United States for their generation, as well for the future generations to come by sharing the Youth and the Elders Declaration at the United Nations. Members of the SOY would develop a cultural exchange between Indigenous youth and communities while on the Unity Run, promoting a positive cultural identity for Indigenous youth by embracing the wisdom and guidance of their elders and cultural leaders (http://www.myspace.com/spiritoftheyouth/blog, retrieved June 4, 2012).
The next section provides a brief summary of the origin and history of the Unity Rides and Runs and what contributed to Haudenosaunee youth undertaking the five-year journey of the Unity Runs.

**The Origin and History of the Unity Rides and Runs Journeys**

I learned of the history of the Unity Rides and Runs by Lakota Chief and 19th Generation Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe, Arvol Looking Horse after he visited McMaster University and Six Nations while attending the “Cry of the Eagle” gathering in 1995. It was during this time that Chief Looking Horse invited the Indigenous students of McMaster University to participate in the 1995 Lakota Unity Ride and Run. I was one of three students who travelled the first week of July 1995 out to the Nakota Reserve of Pheasant Rump to begin this three-week spiritual journey on horseback. We travelled from one Native community to another promoting unity and encouraging the resurgence of our traditional cultural practices and ways of knowing. As a result of my participation in the 1995 Lakota Unity Ride, my son and I were invited to participate in the spiritual and healing ceremonial ride known as “Wiping the Tears” which commemorates the Lakota people who journeyed to Wounded Knee and were massacred in December 1890.

These experiences have resonated within my soul and I went on to participate in the 1996 Lakota Unity Ride and Run, and in the 2003 and 2004 Okanagan Unity Ride from British Columbia to Six Nations, Ontario. I also was asked by Haudenosaunee youth to assist with guidance and moral support from 2004 to 2011 with their Spirit of the
Youth Unity Runs. Much of the history and origins of these rides I learned by sitting and listening to Elders such as Arvol Looking Horse and Birgil Kills Straight sharing their stories, knowledge and experiences with our group of students and community members. To my knowledge many of these stories that I am about to share regarding the history of the Unity Rides and Run have not been written down until now. These stories are compiled from my experiences on these journeys, as well from what has been shared with me and others through a traditional form of passing on knowledge and teachings, an oral tradition known as storytelling (Archibald, 2008; Hulan & Eigenbrod, 2008).

The initial Unity Rides and Runs originated with the Lakota Nation from a prophetic dream which continued to present itself to Lakota Elder Birgil Kills Straight over a number of years in the 1970s. The dream revealed to Birgil a spiritual ride that would take place on horseback and would heal the Lakota people from the horrific massacre which took place on December 29, 1890 (Voss et al., 1999). The massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota was the incident which broke the “Sacred Hoop” of the Lakota Nation, when 380 Lakota men, women and children were annihilated by the United States Calvary (Beasley Jr., 1995; Thornton, 1987). This spiritual ride would carry out the sacred rite of condolence for the Lakota known as “The Wiping the Tears Ceremony,” and it marked the anniversary of Chief Sitting Bull’s murder and commemorated the harsh winter journey Chief Big Foot and his people took to seek refuge with their relatives at Wounded Knee in 1890 (Voss et al., 1999; Beasley Jr., 1995; Thornton, 1987). The sacred ride was held each year from 1986 to 1990, starting on the anniversary date of Sitting Bull’s murder on December 14 and continuing until to the anniversary of the massacre at Wounded Knee on December 29. This ceremony and
sacred ride provided sacred cultural knowledge and practices in aiding the Lakota people with healing their grief and was also known as “Mending the Sacred Hoop of their Nation” (Voss et al., 1999; Beasley Jr., 1995).

The “Wiping the Tears” ride evolved into the Big Foot Memorial Ride\(^6\) (1990-1996) and was a powerful means of bringing the Lakota Nation together as a collective to heal from the historical trauma which was inflicted on them, as well to address the unresolved grief many continue to experience over generations (Brave Heart, 1995; Voss et al., 1999; Beasley Jr., 1995). This ceremonial ride enabled participants to honour their ancestors, help their families and communities heal, and seek ways to preserve the cultural knowledge, history and practices of the Lakota for the next seven generations (Voss et al., 1999; Beasley Jr., 1995). After seven years, the Lakota Elders deliberated among themselves and decided the youth would continue to hold the ceremonial ride with guidance and support from the Elders and that it would be known as the “O’maka Tokatakiya” or Future Generations Ride (1991 to 2011) (http://omakatokatakiya.wordpress.com/2011/07/01/native-sun-news-elders-hand-big-foot-ride-to-future-generation-thursday-october-21-2010/). The O’maka Tokatakiya/Future Generations Ride would focus on retaining the culture, traditional knowledge and practices, as well as the history of the Lakota nation for their children and youth.

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\(^6\) The Big Foot Memorial Ride was an annual spiritual ceremony on horseback carrying out the Lakota “Wiping the Tears” ceremony for the survivors and the families who lost relatives at the Wounded Knee massacre. The Ride followed the original route of Chief Big Foot and his people from Bridger, South Dakota to Wounded Knee. This spiritual ceremony mourns and honours the over 300 Lakota people who died at Wounded Knee, as well as helping those who are living with grief to heal (Taylor, 1996; Beasley, 1995; Freeman’s participation in 1995).
In 1992 some adult Lakota riders decided to fulfill another prophetic vision, that of Black Elk, by reconnecting and unifying with their descendant relatives (Lakota, Dakota and Nakota) brought to Canada by Chief Sitting Bull in 1876 when he sought refuge for his people from the United States Calvary (Neihardt, 1988). With spiritual guidance from the Elders, these Lakota riders began a spiritual journey across the land, traditional territories, sacred sites and the reservations/reserves of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota on horseback and on foot, (re)uniting with their relatives and connecting with other Native Nations. These Rides and Runs were created with the same spiritual essence as the Big Foot Memorial Rides, and were referred to as the Unity Ride and Run. These particular journeys would take place for two to seven weeks during the summer months for four consecutive years. The Unity Ride and Run was a ceremony in which all the riders, runners and support people would follow Lakota ceremonial protocol, sacrifice the comforts of home (rough camping), and while traveling pray for all our Native men, women and children suffering from the effects of compounding historical and ongoing traumas within their lives, families and communities. The healing element of the Unity Ride and Run for those who participated was the connection back to the culture (traditional practices, ceremonies, language, stories, and Indigenous history), the land/sacred sites and the natural environment. This experience provided the riders and runners with a sense of responsibility, a sense of belonging and more importantly a (re)connection to their own spirit and being.

The first year of the four-year Unity Ride and Run journeys was undertaken by the Lakota Nation in 1993 and travelled northward through South Dakota, North Dakota and into Manitoba, Canada. In 1994 the Lakota Unity Ride and Run travelled from
Manitoba to the Nakota Reserve of Pheasant Rump in Saskatchewan, Canada. In 1995 the Lakota Unity Ride and Run travelled 500 miles north in Saskatchewan in two weeks, visiting many First Nations communities until they reached the Dakota reserve known as Wahpetan (near Prince Albert). In the fourth and final year of the Lakota Unity Ride and Run, participants took seven weeks to travel southward through Saskatchewan and Montana, towards the final destination and sacred site of the Lakota known as He Hota Paha (Grey Horn Butte) located in the Black Hills of Wyoming (also known as Devil’s Tower).

Completing the Lakota Unity Ride and Run in 1996 at the sacred site of He Hota Paha was very important for connecting the Lakota back to their original source of sacred knowledge. I remember Arvol Looking Horse and other Elders during the gathering at He Hota Paha speak about Lakota star knowledge and prophecies, that there are six stars that align with six areas in the Black Hills which the Lakota hold as sacred areas to pray—He Hota Paha is one of these sites. The Elders spoke of a time when the White Buffalo Calf Woman would return as a white buffalo to inform the people that they are at a crossroads—return to the original concept of a balanced life or face global destruction. In 1994, a white buffalo was born in Wisconsin. Since the birth of this white buffalo, a number of white buffaloes have been born within the United States and Canada. At He Hota Paha in 1996, Arvol Looking Horse held a sacred ceremony on June 21 for all nations to pray at their sacred sites for the restoration of peace and balance to the world. From that day forward, Arvol has held this sacred ceremony every year on June 21 and it has become known as World Peace and Prayer Day.
In 1996 the Lakota Unity Ride and Run was passed on to the Northern Cree in Canada, who travelled four years (1997 to 2000) through their traditional territories encouraging Cree and other Native communities to re-connect with traditional knowledge and cultural practices while striving for peace and unity with each other. The Unity Ride and Run was then passed on to the Okanagan people in British Columbia; they travelled through their traditional territories the first two years. For the third and fourth year (2003 and 2004) of the Okanagan Unity Ride and Run it was determined by the spiritual Elders that participants begin to proceed eastward across North America, completing the 2003 Ride and Run at Sioux Valley, Manitoba. In 2004, the Okanagan Unity Ride and Run traveled to the Haudenosaunee community of Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario, Canada, completing their journey and opening the 2004 International Indigenous Elders Summit.

The Spirit of the Youth Run – 2005 to 2011

The Unity Ride and Run was passed from the Okanagan People to the Haudenosaunee Youth at the completion of the 2004 International Elders Summit. The Elders at this Summit selected through ceremony two young women as leaders and organizers taking on the responsibility and four-year commitment of the Haudenosaunee Youth Unity Run. In undertaking such a commitment, the two young women and approximately twenty youth formed the Spirit of the Youth Working Group (SOY) and promised to carry and share the message of peace and unity according to the original Lakota vision, as well as to bring attention to the declarations outlined by both the youth
and Elders from the International Elders Summit. In an effort to organize, inform and welcome other Native youth to participate in the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run, the group created a free web-page through the social media platform My Space. This web-page provided Native youth and communities with the details, purpose/mission and background information of the Spirit of the Youth, as well as the work and itineraries for the Unity Run they were promoting. Below is the SOY’s mission as stated on the My Space web-page:

The Spirit of the Youth's mission is to create unity, peace, and recovery of self-identity in order to improve the quality of life of Indigenous peoples of Americas, not only for our generation but also for the future generations to come. We will achieve this by working with the Youth Declaration on an International level. This will allow for cultural exchange between Indigenous peoples of Americas, while reinforcing each individuals’ [sic] cultural identity. As Indigenous youth, we embrace the wisdom and guidance of our elders and leaders who carry us forth within Indigenous communities.

(http://www.myspace.com/spiritoftheyouth/blog/405501257)

This mission statement which was developed by the youth for the SOY was a guiding document in following the traditions of the Haudenosaunee as they travelled on foot as their ancestors did. As such, the Unity Ride and Run (previously using both horses and traveling by foot) became primarily a Unity Run. The Spirit of the Youth group
determined that for those participating in the Unity Run “youth” would be considered anyone under the age of 29. Anyone under the age of 16 wanting to participate was required to have a parent or chaperone with them while on the journey.

The following map displays the first three years of the SOY Unity Run journey (This was taken from the Spirit of the Youth My Space page and the map was created in Map Quest 2008: http://www.myspace.com/spiritoftheyouth). Points “A” to “B” on the map represent the first year of the SOY Unity Run, map points “B” to “F” represent the second year of the SOY Unity Run and points “F” through “I” on the map represents the third year of the SOY Unity Run.

The first year of the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run began at Chiefswood Park, during the Six Nations Grand River Champion of Champions Pow Wow on July 24, 2005.
Chiefswood Park was also gathering site of the International Elders Summit held in 2004 (point A). From Chiefswood Park, the youth relayed on foot approximately 30 to 50 kilometers per day, resting for the night at various farms, Native Friendship Centres and Native communities along the way. It was the organizers’ hope that youth from various communities would journey to the “Central Fire” of the Haudenosaunee in Onondaga territory (near Syracuse, New York). One of the early highlights for the youth on this journey was crossing the international border at the Rainbow Bridge in Niagara Falls based on the treaty rights of the Haudenosaunee in the 1794 Jay Treaty. The travelers proceeded into the United States to the Tuscarora Indian Reservation, NY, Tonawanda Indian Reservation, NY, the historical Cayuga Site of Ganondagan, Victor, NY, and completed their journey at the Onondaga Indian Reservation, NY (point B). The journey was to end with a two-day Youth Gathering. Unfortunately, a Haudenosaunee chief passed away and the youth returned to Six Nations to attend the funeral.

Before the SOY Unity Run began in 2006, the Onondaga community held a Youth Gathering to uplift the minds and spirits of the youth and their supporters prior to starting their journey northward towards the Mohawk Nations. The Spirit of the Youth My Space webpage outlines the route and Haudenosaunee communities to which the youth travelled from July 17 to August 3, 2006, starting at “Onondaga Territory (near Syracuse NY) to Akwesasne Territory (near Cornwall ON) stopping in territories such as Oneida, NY; Tyendanaga, ON; Kahnawa:ke, QC; Kanehsata:ke, QC; and Kanien:ke QC. [estimating that] …approximately 350 to 400 youth and elders [from various Haudenosaunee] arrived in Akwesasne.”

(http://www.myspace.com/spiritoftheyouth/blog/405501257)
Traveling through Haudenosaunee territory the first two years (2005 and 2006) of their journey connected the youth and their support team with the land, the stories of their people and the places the Peace Maker travelled sharing the Great Law of Peace. As well, it connected the youth to other Haudenosaunee people and communities which they may have never visited before. The completion of the 2006 Unity Run was marked with a great festivity in the Mohawk community of Akwesasne (point F) which celebrated the efforts of the youth with a concert by Native Musician Keith Secola. The community also hosted a youth gathering (Yvonne, SOY youth leader, 2011).

In 2007, the SOY Unity Run journeyed south from the Mohawk Reserve of Akwesasne (point F on the map) travelling south through the Adirondack Mountains and along the Hudson River to arrive at the United Nations in New York City on August 9, 2007 (point H). At the United Nations, the youth made a presentation and spoke to world leaders at the "International day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples” regarding the SOY Unity Run and the Youth and Elders declarations. The United Nations organizers were impressed by the youth; they were invited to present a few days later at the “United Nations Fourth Annual Youth Assembly.” For many of the SOY participants, the visit to the United Nations was the highlight of this trip. It brought forth a sense of pride in running during the night through New York City and Manhattan to arrive at the site of the United Nations as the sun was rising to a new day. After visiting the United Nations, the SOY continued the Unity Run to the territory of the Pamunkey Nation in Virginia, which completed the 2007 journey (point I) (Yvonne, SOY youth leader, 2011). During the 2007 SOY Unity Run, one of the Elders involved with the group specified that he wanted to see the youth complete the 2008 Unity Run at the sacred mounds in the Ohio Valley.
After much discussion, the youth decided to travel south to connect with the Cherokee and Tuscarora Nations in South Carolina (The Spirit of the Youth My Space page, the map was created in Map Quest, 2008: http://www.myspace.com/spiritoftheyouth).

This map illustrates the proposed route for the 2008 Unity Run, from the Pamunkey Nation in Virginia (point I) to a reunion with the Cayuga and Seneca people who were relocated to the state of Oklahoma in 1831 (point J).

The final year of the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run (2008) was to be significant in that the youth would complete their four-year commitment in journeying as part of the Unity Run, and as well pass the Unity Run back to the Lakota Nation. The group arranged to travel to communities of the Tuscarora and the Cherokee Nations and then began travelling westward to the state of Oklahoma in hopes of completing their journey
by reconnecting with two Haudenosaunee communities: the Seneca and Cayuga people who were relocated in 1831 to “Indian Territory” (Oklahoma). Unfortunately, the SOY youth faced many challenges during the 2008 Unity Run from limited financial resources to support themselves (food, fuel, camping, etc) to no communal support (youth, parents or Elders) from their home communities. While the youth and adults I interviewed for this research did not speak to the lack of support from their peers, communities and Elders during this portion of the Unity Run, I have to think of the pain and loneliness these youth endured by not having the support of their peers, communities and Elders in completing their journey. This may have explained the burnout and illness which this small group (four to five) of young adults (early to mid-twenties) experienced trying to complete this overall Unity Run journey. I found out that is why the 2008 SOY Unity Run ended at a waterway referred to as “Indian Creek,” near the town of Olivehill, Tennessee. Despite the painful letdown in not completing their journey, before heading home the group made a ceremonial promise with an offering of Indian tobacco at this creek that they would return to complete the SOY Unity Run and pass it to the Lakota Nation.

In 2010, one of the Spirit of the Youth leaders expressed that she was having spiritual dreams which indicated that the SOY group needed to return to “Indian Creek” Tennessee to complete the Unity Run and return it back to the Lakota people. Regularly during 2010 the youth leader would meet with an Elder and I to discuss plans to complete this journey, and in November 2010 Arvol Looking Horse came to visit Six Nations. He explained that the World Peace and Prayer Day which he organizes would be held in St. Paul, Minnesota on June 21, 2011. This information was shared with the Spirit of the
Youth leader and after consultation with her Elder and other youth, it was decided that the SOY Unity Run would conclude and be returned back to the Lakota People during the World Peace and Prayer Day to be held at the Dakota people’s sacred site of B’dote in the city of St. Paul, Minnesota.

The youth leader and I met regularly and decided to travel in March 2011 to renew the ceremonial promise and offer Indian tobacco to the spirits indicating that the Spirit of the Youth group would return to “Indian Creek” (Olivehill) Tennessee in mid-May 2011 to begin to complete their spiritual journey as a Wopila (Gratitude in Lakota) Run. In addition, while we were traveling back to Canada the youth leader and I decided to plan the route which the SOY would take. The Elder with whom the youth leader was working recommended that the route for this final journey go northward along the east banks of the Mississippi. Unfortunately, due to high levels of flooding in April and early May 2011, this proposed route could not be followed; the SOY leader decided to proceed with the journey, revising the route as we travelled.
The journey and five-year commitment which the Spirit of the Youth group undertook with the Unity Run, as well as my Ph.D. journey, have brought me to a place of “coming to know again” (Absolon, 2011). Both these journeys have highlighted the importance of Indigenous knowledge, language, stories and storytelling, sharing and caring for our people, finding a sense of belonging, connecting to the land—our mother earth—and understanding that everything living is central to our existence as Onkwehonwe people (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Absolon, 2008; Meyer, 1998; Struthers, 2001). The Spirit of the Youth Unity Run is a spiritual journey—a ceremony of healing, connecting and learning about relationships and ourselves by means of our body (physical), mind (mental), heart (emotional) and spirit (spiritual) (Meyer, 1998) and by means of the intersection of Haudenosaunee and Lakota cultures.
Haudenosaunee Ontology, Epistemology and Philosophy

For many generations, First Nations people have been analyzed through a Eurocentric lens which has distorted the values, beliefs and culture of Indigenous people. This dissertation aims to shift the way we look at and overcome problems by undertaking a conceptual framework that is based in Indigenous knowledge and epistemology. I will do this by incorporating and building upon Haudenosaunee philosophies expressed in the Kayanaren’kó:wa (The Great Law) and the Tekéni Teyohà:ke Kahswénhtake (Two Row Wampum).

Kayanaren’kó:wa – The Great Law of Peace

The history of The Great Law of Peace and the Peacemaker is very great in length and detail. I will highlight those significant points that contribute to the philosophy which is foundational to the sovereignty and self-determination of the Haudenosaunee.

The Haudenosaunee possess one of the world’s oldest democracies (Johansen, 1995) based on their way of life and spirituality. Oren Lyons (1984), a faith keeper for the Onondaga people and an established academic, articulates the importance of spirituality and the respect that is critical to the political and social welfare of the Haudenosaunee.

Spirituality is the highest form of politics, and our spirituality is directly involved in government. As chiefs we are told that our first and most important duty is to see that the spiritual ceremonies are carried out.
Without ceremonies, one does not have a basis on which to conduct
government for the welfare of the people. This is not only for our people
but for the good of all living things in general…. Whether it is the growing
life of trees, plants or animals, or whether it is human, all life is equal…. We believe it is equal because we are spiritual people. If a tree is standing
there, then the Creator must have put it there, and if the Creator has put it
there, then you must respect it. If a person is sitting there, obviously the
Creator has made this person; therefore, you must respect the person. If
we are to put this belief into practice, then we must protect life and all its
manifestations. (Lyons, 1984, pp. 5-6)

These tenets proved important in the lives and existence of the Haudenosaunee. We are
told by cultural and knowledge carriers that this was not always the case. Long before
the Europeans came to North America, the Haudenosaunee cast aside the Creator’s
natural laws and engulfed themselves in a world of fighting, bloodshed and cannibalism.
Many people and families were torn apart and destroyed by the inhumanity and
vengeance that was widespread among the people. The Peacemaker traveled this land
carrying the message of peace, equity, justice and power of the good mind (Lyons, 1992).
The purpose of The Great Law of Peace is to provide a governing structure to unify and
to “use the mind to create peace, power and righteousness” (Mohawk, 1986, p. xvii)
among nations of people. The Great Law of Peace ensured the overall welfare of the
people. It provided a foundational framework towards rational behavior and thinking to
benefit the people collectively (Mohawk, 1986). Oren Lyons (1992) writes that “the
Peacemaker instilled in the nations the inherent rights of the individual with the process to protect and exercise these rights” (Lyons, 1992, p. 32). The principles of The Great Law of Peace include consensus building, equal rights and leadership roles for women, freedom and independence, as well as the representation of the people through democratic means (Lyons, 1992; Mohawk, 1986). Moreover, the Peacemaker brought the concept of the “good mind” and the idea that “[r]eason is perceived to be the power of the human mind” (Mohawk, 2010, p. 242). Onondaga Clan Mother, Freida Jacques (1997) explains that the “good mind” as a discipline is when we question the intent of why we are doing something: “If that intent is good and clear and helpful and loving” (p. 46), then we are working with a good mind: “The good mind is the ability to clear our minds and hearts to be open to the Creator’s will. Thus, our ancestors have been given a wonderful tool to help us grow more loving and more spiritually in tune with the Creator’s wishes. To become in harmony with the Creator is to truly have the Power of the Good Mind” (Jacques, 1991; p. 31).

Tekéni Teyohà:ke Kahswénhtake - Two Row Wampum

One of the first treaties with European settlers (Dutch) was the Two Row Wampum. The Haudenosaunee recognized and respected the differences in lifestyles, beliefs, and values of the European settlers. Wanting to remain in peace and friendship under The Great Law, the Haudenosaunee established the Two Row Wampum. The philosophy of this Wampum belt expresses an agreement and a responsibility between the Haudenosaunee and the new settlers to North America regarding respect and the peaceful coexistence between the two cultures.
[This]… treaty established our equal rights in this land and our separate and equal coexistence on this land between our two peoples, the canoe of the Indian and the boat of the white man going down the river of life in peace and friendship forever. (Lyons, 1992, p. 33)

As the Haudenosaunee have shared the story of this wampum belt over many generations, it is presented as the metaphor of two water vessels sailing parallel to each other in a river—a ship symbolizing the culture of the white man/settlers and a canoe representing the Onkwehonwe/Indigenous people’s way of life. These vessels represented the difference in culture, lifestyle and language of the two groups. The agreement represented within this Wampum belt describes the respect and harmony in which both the Haudenosaunee and the settlers can exist parallel to each other, neither interfering with the other’s culture or lifestyle (Hill, 1990). Tuscarora and Six Nations Historian, Richard Hill (1990) shares in the article, “Oral Memory of the Haudenosaunee, Views of the Two Row Wampum” the perspectives of two prominent Haudenosaunee leaders, Huron Miller and Jacob Thomas, as well as the oral history and the “political protocol between two races” outlined within the Two Row Wampum which speaks about the respect, responsibility and friendship between the two races of people. Yet, for Onkwehonwe people there has always been a caution to never straddle the cultures of two races: “If this so happens that… their feet [are] in each of the two boats, there will be a high wind and the boats will separate and the person that has his feet in each of the boats shall fall between the boats, and there is no living soul who will be able to bring them
back to the right way given by the Creator but only one—the Creator himself” (Hill, 1990).

The treaty is represented within a wampum belt illustrating the relationship the Haudenosaunee have with Europeans. The belt consists of two parallel rows of purple beads with rows of white beads on either side of the purple rows. One purple row represents the Haudenosaunee and the other represents the European settlers. The white rows on either side of the purple rows represent peace, power and righteousness. These terms do not represent the western notion of power and privilege. For the Haudenosaunee, the terms of peace, power and righteousness represent the cultural knowledge which is at the foundation of Haudenosaunee government and life. The concept of “peace” represents The Great Law of Peace brought to us by the Peacemaker, which defines how we are to conduct ourselves with respect and equality to everything around us. The term “power” stands for the power of a “good mind.” The concept of “righteousness” symbolizes the virtue in living with a “good mind” and incorporating The Great Law of Peace into our daily activities. John Mohawk refers to righteousness as “the shared ideology of the people using their purest and most unselfish minds. It occurs when the people put their minds and emotions in harmony with the flow of the universe and the intentions of the Good Mind or the Great Creator” (Barreiro, 2010, p. 241-242). Mohawk also explains that we as humans have to put aside our “thoughts of prejudice, privilege, and superiority” and recognize that all of creation is equal. By having such thoughts of superiority we as humans are not appreciating the gifts and benefits the Creator has bestowed upon this earth: “Nothing belongs to human beings, not even their labor or their skills, for ambition and ability are also the gifts of the Great Creator”
(Barreiro, 2010, p. 242). By having the gift of reason the human mind has the capability to “make righteous decisions about complicated issues” (Barreiro, 2010, p. 242). Mohawk explains the principles of reason and righteousness as understood by the Haudenosaunee:

The Peacemaker began his teachings based on the principle that human beings were given the gift of the power of reason in order that they may settle their differences without the use of force. He proposed that in every instance humans should use every effort to counsel about, arbitrate, and negotiate their differences…. All men whose minds are healthy can desire peace, he taught, and there is ability within all human beings, and especially in the young human beings, to grasp and hold strongly to the principles of righteousness. The ability to grasp the principles of righteousness is a spark within the individual that society must fan and nurture so that it may grow. Reason is seen as the skill that humans must be encouraged to acquire in order that the objectives of justice may be attained and no one’s rights abused. (Barreiro, 2010, p. 242)

Another principle which the Peacemaker brought to the Haudenosaunee through the Great Law was the understanding of the concept of power. To enact true peace is thought to be both spiritual and political with a “spiritual conscious society using its abilities of reason that resulted in a healthy society” (Barreiro, 2010, p. 243). The Peacemaker brought together five nations (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and the Seneca) to
form the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in which the principles of the Great Law of Peace formed the spiritual and political foundations for governance of the Haudenosaunee people.

The Tekéni Teyohà:ke Kahswénhtake (Two Row Wampum) works within the context of Kayanaren’kó:wa (The Great Law of Peace) in which the Haudenosaunee extend this binding agreement to the Crown (Britain), as well as to other nations to ensure peaceful co-existence between the nations and with the natural world. This agreement was first made with the Dutch and later accepted by the United Kingdom. A subsequent Wampum belt known as the Silver Covenant Wampum is represented by three links of silver chain bound together. This is to ensure that the agreement does not tarnish and that the two groups coexist in peace and friendship forever. It is said that periodically the silver covenant chain would be taken out by both groups and polished to remember the binding agreement of the Tekéni Teyohà:ke Kahswénhtake.

It is my hope that one day both Western and Indigenous knowledge can coexist within the academy at a level of respect for the ways of understanding the world each has to offer. As a First Nations scholar/researcher, at times I have felt that I have had one foot in each of the two boats. This leaves me to question, am I really straddling two cultures or have I made a choice to step into the White man’s world? If I have chosen to leave my “Indian world,” do I leave my identity behind? These are questions I have asked myself for much of my life, confused as to whether or not I have left my “Indianness” at the door of the “White man.” After reading Hill’s (1990) article with Huron Miller and Jake Thomas’s interview, I have taken solace in one part of the
narrative in which Huron Miller and Jake Thomas share what happens if we as Native people decide to embark into the Whiteman’s world:

The Whiteman said, ‘What will happen if your people…go into my vessel?’

The Onkwehonweh replied, ‘If this happens, then they will have to be guided by my canoe’. (Hill, 1990, p. 26)

When I reflect back on my struggle with identity and the questions of having one foot in either vessel, I realize that we do not lose ourselves or our identity as an Onkwehonwe if we decide to pursue life in the White man’s world. We will always be “Indian” and the cultural guidance from our people to remain “Indian” is always there guiding and supporting us. This is not to say that I will not be influenced or altered by colonization and the academic environment, I will. Yet I can take that knowledge from the Western world to support and enhance my Indigenous worldview, approach to research and my theoretical framework, and offer the Western world other ways of knowing. The struggle will be trying to balance the two worlds in either environment.

**Onkwehonwe:neha: “the way we live our lives”**

In my conversations with Haudenosaunee culture carriers, they have told me that our freedom and equality exists within the power of our “good minds.” They say no matter what happens to you, as long as you live by the foundation of the natural laws and principles within The Great Law of Peace, this will assure an Onkwehonwe person
freedom. Therefore, by having a “good mind” it reinforces and reaffirms the values, ethics, roles and responsibilities we as human beings have to the natural world and to each other. The following sections on Haudenosaunee Values, Ethics and Philosophy are an overview from the Neighbors of the Onondaga (NOON) website http://www.peacecouncil.net/NOON/articles/culture1.html which provides a general understanding of the tenets presented within stories and teachings of the Haudenosaunee people.
### Values
- Thinking collectively, considering the future generations.
- Consensus in decision making, considering all points of view.
- Sharing of the labor and benefits of that labor.
- Duty to family, clan, nation, Confederacy and Creation.
- Strong sense of self-worth without being egotistic.
- People must learn to be very observant of the surroundings.
- Everyone is equal and is a full partner in the society, no matter what their age.
- The ability to listen is as important as the ability to speak.
- Everyone has a special gift or talent that can be used to benefit the larger community.

### Ethics
- To be generous
- To be thankful
- To honor others
- To be cooperative
- To be honest
- To feed others
- To show respect
- To be kind
- To live in peace
- To ignore evil or idle talk
- To share
- To be hospitable
- To love your family
- To live in harmony with nature

### Philosophy
- There is a Creator who produced the things that give bounty to this life.
- The universe is full of living beings - sun, moon, stars, earth, winds, and rain.
- There is a living spirit in all things - animals, plants, minerals, water, and winds.
- People have power, called *orenda* that accumulates through life experiences.
- People should live in peace with each other.
- People should live in harmony with nature.
- People should be thankful every day.
- People should be kind, sharing what they have.
- Life is a journey, as people are born from the earth, exist on the earth and are returned to the earth to continue that journey after death.

Retrieved from website: http://www.peacecouncil.net/NOON/articles/culture1.html
During the writing of my Master’s thesis (2004), I interviewed a traditional Haudenosaunee woman, Sadie Buck who explained to me that when European settlers came to North America they had a different mindset than Onkwehonwe people. The Haudenosaunee understood sovereignty as freedom which exists through our good minds and actions. Our good minds resembled the actions and reasons which are guided by the philosophy, values and ethics through our everyday lives. As long as we continue to honour the principles of peace and justice regarding the earth, natural world, one another, as well as all of creation we remain equal and free upon this land. Many of the people I spoke to for my Master’s thesis spoke about our culture not as a religion, but as a way of life.

There have been some people who challenge the governance system and sovereignty of the Haudenosaunee by saying, “What about the water crisis, poverty, poor housing, lack of jobs, etc.?” If your basic needs are not met, what relevance does self-determination and sovereignty have for Onkwehonwe people? These are very important questions and they refer to realities in many Onkwehonwe communities. Yet, first and foremost we have to understand that such issues as the “water crisis, poverty, poor housing and lack of jobs, etc.” are the results of colonial rule and domination which have imposed strategies of genocide, assimilation, acculturation, economic exploitation, cultural decimation and political exclusion for many generations. Lee (1992) articulates the same sentiments regarding the conditions of Native people and communities as being a result of colonization. This point is expressed when Lawlor W. “Bill” Lee (1992) cites the journalist Robertson’s writings as he travelled and witnessed the impact colonization has had in First Nations communities:
“Indian poverty is a deliberate and inevitable product of Canadian attitudes and social structures.” and, “…poverty has been built in, inescapable.” The conditions that reflect weak, apathetic Native communities are a direct result of a lengthy and pervasive colonization process. Colonization is defined here as the subjugation of one people by another through destruction and/or weakening of basic institutions of the subjugated culture and replacing them with those of the dominate culture. (Lee, 1992, p. 212-213)

Moreover, Native people have been striving to regain their self-determination, self-government and Aboriginal rights which are the manifestation of nationhood and continue to be central in our lives (Alfred, 1995). According to Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred, “[A]chieving national ‘self-determination’ means regaining the freedom that their nation claimed before colonization and establishing ways of governance that are culturally specific and derived from a rich traditional past” (Alfred quoted by Oneida scholar Lina Sunseri, 2011, p. 36). Having this recognition and status within North America would confront and dismantle the many laws and legislation which support the imperialist notion of capitalism within North America.

My understanding from discussions with knowledge carriers is that Onkwehonwe sovereignty and a “good mind” provide us with a cultural identity and a sense of belonging to the land, our way of life and to our Onkwehonwe people. When you have a strong foundation in your Onkwehonwe beliefs, you understand that you are a part of a
collective, one that includes all other Native nations. When we have our good mind we
are not held back from asking for help; we understand that by contributing to an
individual, family, community, or nation we are contributing to all of us as a people as
well as creation as a whole. In our teachings we are told to share, be generous and be
grateful. This doesn’t mean we won’t struggle, but rather that we have the freedom and
the independence within our good minds to bring about change and action for the benefit
of our people and creation, which is our responsibility.

For the Haudenosaunee, the Tekéni Teyohà:ke Kahswénhtake - Two Row
Wampum is a strong foundation in our Onkwehonwe beliefs and values which carries us
through generations. By remaining firm in our understanding of and maintaining respect
for the teachings of the Creator and The Great Law of Peace, we will remain a distinct
and strong people upon our lands. Therefore, Onkwehonwe people are not only seeking
peace, equality and justice for their own lives, but also for the earth, the natural
environment and all of creation.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The study of culture-based activism and the transformation of identity and promotion of well-being through Indigenous epistemology, agency and Indigenous resilience will be appraised primarily from the insights of Indigenous scholars in various academic fields, such as sociology, psychology, geography, history, health, education, and Indigenous studies, as well as from other sources such as governmental reports and literature, such as the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People. This chapter is broken down into various sections, developing and exploring ideas of culture-based activism, Indigenous epistemology and agency, cultural identity and well-being, Indigenous resilience, and positive youth development.

The chapter begins by exploring the notion of culture-based activism among Native people in North America. Indigenous scholars challenge conventional understandings of social movements and offer an Indigenous perspective for understanding the significance of Native youth culture-based movements. Examples of past Native youth movements and awareness walks/runs are explored to provide insight into what Native youth want to accomplish by bringing awareness and change to the issues Native people endure. Some of these Native youth groups travelled to promote pride and encourage Native people to return to their cultural beliefs and practices. The idea of culture-based activism is supported by Brazilian educator and scholar Paulo Friere’s (2000) work on how liberation is transformed on various levels through praxis
and decolonization as Native youth rise to bring change and awareness regarding their families and communities.

The chapter then examines Indigenous epistemology and agency, and how culture-based activism is connected and intersects with Indigenous knowledge and consciousness. The next section of this chapter briefly reviews the limitations government policies have placed on Native identity and how this has had an impact on Native communities. Next, Indigenous well-being is explored through the understanding of a wholistic perspective; also explored is how such a perspective contributes to cultural identity. A wholistic perspective supports an understanding of the reciprocal nature in which cultural identity and well-being strengthens an individual’s resilience, as well how resilience conveys a sense of purpose based on the collective rights and justice of culture-based activism.

The chapter concludes by exploring the idea of “positive youth development” as a way to engage youth in a pro-active and supportive environment while mentoring and teaching Indigenous values and skills to help youth become engaged citizens within their community.

**Culture-based Activism**

Many Eurocentric theoretical approaches would not offer an accurate articulation or analysis of the compelling motives and drives which are at the heart of Indigenous resistance and social justice. Sociology professor David Long (1992) states that “Our ability to understand the ‘life’ of the Native Indian movements in Canada also means
respecting its ‘Indianness’, which suggest that the unique cultural underpinnings of this movement in particular and of social movements in general need to be central on our analyses” (Long, 1992, p. 118). Our “Indianness” begins with our “nationhood” and our culturally-specific views of the world, which depend on understanding and acknowledging the Indigenous history prior to first contact with settlers (Long, 1992). Kiera Ladner (2008), a Cree scholar, agrees with Long (1992) and argues that Western academics would remove or lose the primary intent of Indigenous movements because it does not comprehend the pre-colonial consciousness of Native people regarding nationhood and their relationship with the earth. Colonization has had a tremendous impact on Indigenous People’s lives; however if we are to preserve and maintain a level of our pre-colonial consciousness and knowledge we have to move towards decolonization (Ladner, 2008). Ladner (2008) shares the Cree notion of “Aysaka’paykinit” which translates to “contesting the rope around the nation’s neck.” This Cree understanding is a resistance to the dominating forces which Native nations have experienced as a result of oppression, colonization, and assimilation strategies which have resulted in the loss of our lands, environment and natural resources (Ladner, 2008). Frantz Fanon (2004) describes this colonial state of affairs as dehumanizing efforts which the colonizer has used to reduce the colonized to the “state of an animal” (Fanon, 2004, p. 7), thus leaving Native people contesting the demoralizing control by the government through its colonizing policies and its directives over every aspect of their lives (Ladner, 2008; Freire, 2000).

Nationhood, decolonization, history (Ladner, 2008; Long, 1992) and protectionism (Long, 1992) are the theoretical underpinnings of Native social
movements. Rima Wilkes (2006) introduces the idea that social movements among
Native people exist in two forms: the first undertakes a “political challenge for change”
involving non-institutional tactics, networks and a large scale collective; the second form
involves decolonization (Wilkes, 2006) by reconnecting to cultural identity and well-
being as a form of healing from the generations of historical trauma (Brave Heart-Yellow
Horse, 1995). The latter form of Native movement involves the connection to Aboriginal
epistemology (Ermine, 1995) through the means of Indigenous spirituality, cultural
practices and connection to the land (Johnson, 1996).

Ladner (2008) explains that Indigenous people need to (de)colonize, stressing the “(de)” is a conscious effort to change our thinking and behavior back to a pre-colonial
mindset. Yet, Frantz Fanon (2004) argues that decolonization is a historical process
which “sets out to change the order of the world, [but] is clearly an agenda for total
disorder” (p. 2). Fanon (2004) continues by saying that the antagonistic force of the
colonizer will continue to “fabricate” and support their validity and wealth by continuing
to impose the “colonial system” on the colonized, despite their efforts and attempts to
decolonize. While what Fanon (2004) writes is true, Waziyatawin & Michael Yellow
Bird (2012) and Ladner (2008) believe that decolonization is not a passive gesture, and
that we can oppose the efforts of the colonial system through three principles:
“consciousness raising, critical thinking and critical education” (Absolon & Herbert,
1997, p. 211). Paulo Freire (2000) articulates that the colonized will not only have to
liberate themselves, they will also have to liberate the colonizer. Therefore,
decolonization involves critically thinking about and analyzing ourselves and the socio-
political world around us, as well as speaking up and educating mainstream society and
those in the colonial systems regarding the injustices which continue to oppress (Absolon & Herbert, 1997). Freire (2000) also refers to the notion of “praxis” which involves “reflection and action” in transforming and liberating ourselves and the world from the oppressive state of colonization. Yet Freire (2000) cautions us that we cannot have “reflection” and “action” without each other. To “sacrifice action” leads us to “verbalism”—all talk and very little action—whereas if we sacrifice “reflection” we are acting for the sake of action and negating the opportunity of dialogue and understanding (Freire, 2000, p. 88).

These notions of decolonization and praxis have led to my desire to understand from an Indigenous perspective how Indigenous scholars define “Indigenous activism” within this context. Alfred’s (2005) book Wasáse, refers to the term “activism” as “direct action,” and indicates that this notion refers to a genuine action which is theorized by reaction, thus forming statements or rhetoric (p. 81). Action is a sacred element among Indigenous people, the driving force for social change which is manifested through the physicality of the act (Alfred, 2005). Alfred explains that the notion of “direct action” is:

Actions—thinking, feeling, and behaving indigenously—are the things that make our movement Onkwehonwe, not simply what we might name it. Our indigeneity is observable as a personal quality... This kind of authenticity is a powerful melding of renewal and continuity. It can be figured with reference to history, drawing on indigenous values and teachings, and from recent cultural developments that respect indigenous principles. Such a combination creates a cultural foundation for contemporary forms of resistance, making in effect new cultural
practices to shape authentically indigenous movements which are both
cougrows from historical forms and organic expressions of timeless
indigenous values. (2005, p. 81)

In contrast, Native American scholar Jerry Stubben (2006) explains that Native activism
is both spiritual and political, and there is no way in separating the two. Native people’s
system of governance, social structures and ethics of cultural behavior is based on the
spiritual relationship we have with the earth and natural world. Therefore Native
activism is “preserving the spiritual rights, sites and freedoms” (Stubben, 2006, p. 83) of
Native people and of the land which we were born upon. The Onhenton Karihwatekwen
(Thanksgiving Address) affirms Stubben’s (2006) thoughts regarding our underlying
action in protecting and defending our natural resources (George-Kanentiio, 2008).
George-Kanentiio (2008) points out that “We realized the earth was a living entity and
very conscious of the humans who walked on her. We see ourselves as defenders of the
natural world whenever we rallied to oppose unwarranted intrusions into our community
by Canada or the United States” (p. 75).

While there are families that have always remained true to their “Indianness,”
there are many Native people who have lost their Native identity and cultural connection
through the various forms of colonization and oppression. Ladner (2008) acknowledges
that colonization has had a great impact on the lives and communities of First Nations
people, and that many have fallen victim to this abuse. Others who have resisted and
challenged the political powers (action) without understanding or having a core
grounding in their cultural knowledge and philosophies (lack of reflection) begin to
undertake and perpetuate the same oppressive behaviors and thoughts as our oppressor (Freire, 2000; Duran, 2006). Ladner (2008) argues that Native people need to (de)colonize their thinking and behaviors back to our ancestral philosophies and epistemologies.

Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird (2012) would agree with Ladner, and define decolonization as a “meaningful and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands. Decolonization is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonial structure and realizing in Indigenous liberation” (p. 3). Hence the question arises, how do we achieve Indigenous liberation by means of decolonization? Freire (2000) and Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird (2012) express that liberation begins with our mind and consciousness, as well as our attitudes. When we realize the impact that colonization has had on every fiber of our existence, some become angry and rebellious in their attitudes and actions. Albert Memmi (1991) suggests two ways in which the colonized can overcome colonization: assimilate or revolt. By assimilating, the colonized is assuming the values, beliefs and the customs of the colonizer, and by revolting the colonized is reacting to the colonial situation and therefore contributing to and perpetuating a cycle of colonization (Hart, 2007). Therefore, Memmi contends that the only way to obtain complete liberation is through revolution by freeing oneself from all levels of the oppression and severing all ties to the colonizers’ ethnic and religion group.

Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird (2012) articulate Freire’s notion of moving beyond the rebellion to a critical and revolutionary position that does not just denounce the injustices Native people have experienced, but strives for a “new utopia” (Waziyatawin & Yellow
Bird, 2012, p. 125) for how we view and interact with the world. Indigenous scholar Jeff Corntassel (2012) agrees and explains that decolonization praxis is more than symbolic gestures or the periodical political uprising. Decolonizing is a resurgence of our cultural understanding for how we are to live our lives. In addition, decolonization for Native people is also the process of “healing.” Ojibwe scholar Calvin Morrisseau (1998) shares this thought:

Healing is a matter of the heart and not just the “head.”… What we lack is the confidence and knowledge to recognize what is important in healing. It is this gentle pearl that must be cultivated and brought back to life. (p. 6) (Mayuzumi, 2006, p.12)

As the heart heals, our minds and consciousness begin to transform, and this transformation is reflected in our actions and behaviors. David Gegeo & Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo (2001) extend Freire’s (2000) idea of critical praxis to an Indigenous context:

Indigenous critical praxis refers to people’s own critical reflection on culture, history, knowledge, politics, economics, and the sociopolitical contexts in which they are living their lives; and then their taking the next step to act on these critical reflections…. It flows from and is deeply rooted in indigenous epistemology. By engaging in indigenous critical praxis, villages transform their epistemology and in the process are themselves also transformed. (2001, p. 59)
Indigenous culture-based activism is not only infused with critical praxis, but also facilitates spiritual and cultural “healing.” Even the early Native movements in the 1970s premised their actions based on Native culture and spirituality. Journeys such as the 1976 Canadian Native Caravan across Canada, the 1978 Longest Walk across the United States, the Unity Caravans and the White Roots of Peace, the Lakota “Wiping the Tears” (1986-1990) and the Unity Rides and Runs (1992-present) all begin with reflection on current possibilities for taking action towards the healing and social justice for their people.

Native people have been involved with culture-based activism since the encroachment on land and Native territories by settlers when their rights as a people were not recognized. Troy R. Johnson (1996) explains that many Native leaders and medicine people prophesied that Native youth would rise and take a stand in the protection of the earth, natural environment and their people. As early as the 1950s, Native youth and Elders formed what was known as the Unity Caravan which travelled to various Native communities (urban and reservations) sharing Native prophecies and urging young Native people to return to their cultural practices and beliefs (Banks, 1991; George-Kanentiio, 2008). The late Seneca scholar, John Mohawk defined the Unity Caravan as a traditional Indian movement which

offered to the world the concept of the synthesis of emotional and psychological functions usually associated with religion, with the need to organize in specific ways to struggle with political realities... it must be a political movement that seeks to analyze and counter those forces
that are responsible for the destruction of Natural World cultures…. It would be directed with a priority to give rise to power at the grassroots level… (Barreiro, 2010, p. 196)

The goal of such a spiritual movement was the “redevelopment of culture on a human scale [which] is the only practical way that people and peoples can regain control of their lives and destinies…. Native people have called that goal sovereignty… self-determination, and… self-sufficiency” (Barreiro, 2010, p. 199). Another group of young Haudenosaunee men were concerned and inspired after they heard the “call for action” by Elders at a gathering in the Southwest. This resulted in the formation of the White Roots of Peace Caravan as well as the Native North American Traveling College Caravan during the late 1960s and into the early 1970s (George-Kanentiio, 2008). These caravans brought Native cultural awareness and education to Indian reservations, urban centres, prisons and post-secondary education facilities (Barreiro, 2010), sharing the importance of Native culture, land, traditional languages, ceremonies, treaty and inherent rights, and encouraging community members to take pride in who they were as Onkwehonwe people (Gray, 2003; George-Kanentiio, 2008). This form of Indigenous activism created a renewed sense of pride by bringing our minds back to “One Mind” and providing focus and direction. Mohawk writer and activist Doug George-Kanentiio (2008) describes the Caravans as

a way to visit troubled spots and to share information among the native nations. There was a strong spiritual component to the trips as the
various participants recited prayers, made offerings of tobacco at sacred sites, and shared songs and dances. (2008, p. 33)

Interestingly, George-Kanentiio (2008) describes the group as being “schooled in Native activism and [that they] would teach others how to organize on the community level” (2008, p. 33) and advocate for peaceful change. Another key feature of this group of Haudenosaunee youth was their “adherence to the longhouse teaching and ceremonies, both of which formed the basis upon which they acted” (George-Kanentiio, 2008, p. 34). The caravans were a way to reach and educate not only Native people, but all people regarding the value and the cultural importance of Native people and their contribution to North America (George-Kanentiio, 2008). However, George-Kanentiio (2008) expresses a concern that many Native people had that this type of “peaceful movement” would not induce change. This concern gave rise to the formation of groups such as the warrior societies and Native armed resistance groups who took more aggressive measures in protecting and defending Native land and inherent rights against the government (George-Kanentiio, 2008).

In 1974 Native people in Canada organized the Native People’s Caravan which traveled from British Columbia to Parliament Hill in Ottawa for the opening of Parliament on September 30, 1974. This group recognized that some Native organizations which were formed to support the people, such as the National Indian Brotherhood and the Native Council of Canada—were extensions of the Canadian government and many felt these newly-formed Native organizations were not listening to the needs of the people (Harper, 1979). Therefore, the focus of this Caravan was to unify
the people, to bring change and awareness regarding the injustices Aboriginal people faced over generations, as well to take back control under their own terms (Harper, 1979). Interestingly, while those individuals crossed the Canadian landscape campaigning to be heard by the Canadian government and those Native organizations that were created to represent their interests, the Caravan had a greater impact on the Caravan participants. Cree and “Urban Elder” (Toronto, ON), Vern Harper (1979) explains what he and others experienced as a result of their experience traveling with the Caravan:

The Caravan was a testing ground all the way around, and I think that’s where a lot of us started to get honest with ourselves. It made us look at ourselves, and at our situation. It’s hard for people to analyze their situation when they’re just trying to put bannock and lard on the table, just trying to survive in the reserves and the Métis colonies and the cities. But in 1974 people said “O.K., we’re going to survive, but we’re going to survive with pride and dignity.” This is one of the things the Caravan taught us. As Native people we’re not doing anything if we don’t have that self-worthiness and pride and dignity that was given to us by our ancestors. (Harper, 1979, p. 84)

Another Native caravan formed in the United States in 1978, known as the “Longest Walk.” This caravan also had a purpose similar to the “Native People’s Caravan” in seeking the removal of oppressive Indian governmental policies, as well as encouraging unity and self-determination among all Native nations throughout the United States (Deere, 1978). The walk began in San Francisco, California and traveled to the
Capital of the United States in Washington, D.C. The journey took several weeks to complete and when the Longest Walkers arrived in Washington, D.C. they were greeted and supported by approximately thirty thousand Native and non-Native people who demanded that the United States government eliminate the oppressive Indian policies which governed their lives and return cultural rights and property back to Native people. This was one of the largest Native movements in History and it resulted in numerous policy changes within the United States for their Indigenous populations (Josephy Jr. et al., 1999; Young Buffalo, 1978; Deere, 1978; Taylor, 1983; Wilkes, 2006).

When land and environmental-based programs and initiatives are combined with culture-based action/activism we see Native youth involved with their healing, transformation/liberation and involved in social justice; such combined initiatives include local/national based initiatives such as the Big Foot Memorial Ride (Lakota), Spirit of the Youth Unity Run (Haudenosaunee Youth) and the Protecting Our Mother Walk (Grassy Narrows Youth), to name a few. The Big Foot Memorial Ride and the Unity Rides and Runs are closely related. Yet, if we examine the Protecting Our Mother walk which consisted of twenty-two Grassy Narrows youth who walked 1,850 kilometers from northwestern Ontario (Kenora) starting on April 30, 2008, to arrive at Queen’s Park, Toronto, Ontario on May 26, 2008 (Martin, 2008), we see that this journey consisted of the Indigenous critical praxis based in the culture and knowledge of the Anishnaabe. Chrissy Swain, the youth organizer for this walk expressed that this journey was a spiritual journey [and] not a protest…. Every day brings another message.

The idea for the walk came from a spiritual dream and it also came out of
frustration of seeing all these people being arrested for trying to stand up for the land and their rights. (Martin, 2008, http://www.sootoday.com/content/news/full_story.asp?StoryNumber=32042)

The Protecting Our Mother Earth Walk is a spiritual journey which connects Indigenous people back to their land, and the land to the people (Martin, 2008). What is important on these spiritual journeys is that the youth are travelling by means of transportation that is traditional for Native people, by horseback or by foot. Traveling across the land on foot slows a person down to reflect on the past and present struggles that the Anishnaabe people face with regard to protecting the land and the natural environment from the exploitation of logging and chemical spraying of the land (Martin, 2008). A young father who participated in the Protecting Our Mother Earth Walk stated that, “Becoming involved with my people has become a life-changing experience. I will probably miss my son's first steps, but I think of it as if I am taking them for him out here on the road.” (Martin, 2008, http://www.sootoday.com/content/news/full_story.asp?StoryNumber=32042)

This young man brings up an important point regarding the connection to journeying/walking to ensure that our way of life is carried forward for future generations. However, “undertaking an actual journey is often seen as an outward expression of, and crucially a catalyst for… an inner (psychological or spiritual) journey” (Morgan, 2010, p. 248). Alun David Morgan (2010) explains that journeys by foot,
canoe or horseback serve as physical challenges which engage the traveler with the
natural environment and sacred spaces, as well as reducing one’s pace of life to allow for
personal reflection.

Susie O’Brien’s (2007) research on the Seri and Tohono O’odham Indians’ desert
walk for diabetes from El Desemboque, Mexico to Tucson, Arizona determined that
collective interventions among Indigenous people resemble the mobilization of citizens in
a global context while taking a stand for their health and sovereignty as Indigenous
people. She explains that walking “is both peripatetic and forward-moving. It demands
unmediated engagement with a physical world whose rhythms still confound the dictates
of civilization. At the same time, a journey such as this asserts human agency, linking
the steps of the walkers in a collective act of self-determination” (O’Brien, 2007, p. 95).
Yet walking is also connected to our consciousness through our body on various levels
(Solnit, 2001; Morgan, 2010). Rebecca Solnit (2001) speaks to the state in which the
body, mind and the world are aligned (p. 5) through the movement of walking and that
walking is more than arriving at our destination—it also the means to how we arrive at
transformation, clarification and liberation:

The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the
passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a
series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal
and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape
of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often
seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though
thinking were traveling rather than making… for the motions of the mind cannot be traced, but those of the feet can…. The surprises, liberations and clarifications of travel can sometimes be garnered by going around the block as well as going around the world, and walking travels both near and far. Or perhaps walking should be called movement, not travel, for one can walk in circles or travel around the world immobilized in a seat, and a certain kind of wanderlust can only be assuaged by the acts of the body itself in motion, not the motion of the car, boat or plane. It is the movement as well as the sights going by that seems to make things happen in the mind, and this is what makes walking ambiguous and endlessly fertile: it is both means and end, travel and destination. (Solnit, 2001, p. 5-6)

An important point which Solnit (2001) makes that is connected to what O’Brien (2007) has expressed about the significance of walking is that it is “a conscious cultural act rather than a means to an end” (Solnit, 2007, p. 14) and that the assertion of political agency is connected to the past, present and the future for Indigenous people (O’Brien, 2007):

Whatever else the walk was for its participants, it was an exercise in hope, a physical and symbolic movement forward. By engaging with the modern temporal perspective of the future, while simultaneously honouring the ecological time of their ancestors, the walkers not only
symbolically challenged the prevailing assumption of a single temporal mode, insisting on the vitality of alternate temporal orders concealed within the dominate; they also signaled through the strength of their steps their refusal to be left behind in the economic, political and social worlds created by that dominate order. (O’Brien, 2007, p. 93-94)

There has been a long history of colonization, oppression and traumatic experiences among First Nations people. However, there also has been a long-term struggle to preserve and maintain the long-existing cultural knowledge, beliefs and values which are firmly rooted within First Nations communities. As Laurence J. Kirmayer et al. put it, “Aboriginal people… are involved in healing their own traditions, repairing the ruptures and discontinuity in the transmission of traditional knowledge and values, and asserting their collective identity and power” (2003, p. S15). Indigeuous (Tewa Nation) author and professor Gregory Cajete (1994) writes that regardless of the problems within Native people’s lives “cultural roots run deep”:

It is true that much has been lost in the wholesale assaults on Indian culture during the past 500 years. But, the cultural roots of Indian ways of life run deep. Even in communities where they seem to have totally disappeared, they merely lie dormant, waiting for the opportunity and the committed interest of Indian people to start sprouting again… The tree may seem lifeless, but the roots still live in the hearts of many Indian people. (p. 192)
Native people know that healing begins by reconnecting to a system of cultural knowledge which honours the spirit of Native people through their relationships with the land, ancestors, family, community, natural elements of the environment, and the animals (Mckenzie & Morrissette, 2003; Wadden, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Morrissette et al., 1993; Thomas & Bellefeuille, 2006; Hunter et al., 2006; Dapice, 2006; Voss et al., 1999; Roué, 2006; Strickland et al., 2006; Stewart, 2008; France & Rodriguez, 2004; Wilson, 2003). This cultural knowledge is conveyed through the collectivity, ceremonies and cultural practices upon the land and through connection with the natural environment (Thomas & Bellefeuille, 2006; Morrissette et al., 1993; Voss et al., 1999; Roué, 2006; Wilson, 2003), and it produces a “good mind” and a bond to the “spirit-body-mind-self in relation to everything that is” (Voss et al., 1999, p. 86).

Culture-based activism is a moving beyond the rebellion against colonization and “coming back again” (Absolon, 2011) to an Indigenous pre-consciousness in a modern time through the notions of decolonization and indigenous praxis. By exploring and shedding light on the past experiences and actions of Native people we have come to learn that culture-based activism encompasses a sense of purpose which is connected to Indigenous Peoples’ “ways of knowing” and “ways of doing.” It is also the healing and spiritual (re)connection of our present to our ancestors of the past and to those unborn children of the future. Culture-based activism from an Indigenous perspective also encompasses a connection to the land, ceremonies, language, and what it means to be Onkwehonwe in this current day (identity and well-being). Hart (2002) expresses that we as a people need “to recapture our peoples’ language, history and understanding of the
world, take and live those teachings which will support us in this attempt to overcome oppression and reach mino-pimatisiwin—the good life (pg. 32).” This review of the literature has provided an Indigenous theoretical understanding of how I will utilize this evolving concept of culture-based activism by drawing on the experience and knowledge of Onkwehonwe youth grassroots initiatives, such as the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run and how they have connected to mino-pimatisiwin.

**Indigenous Epistemology and Agency**

Culture-based action and Indigenous epistemology are closely related. Social Work and Filipino professor, Alma M. O. Trinidad’s (2009) research with Native Hawaiian youth discusses the importance of “place-based action” and the impact this has for Hawaiian youth working with the land. Through her study she was able to have conversations with Hawaiian Elders who explained to her that “place-based action” empowers young people to know who they are, where they come from and to take the responsibility to stand up and advocate within a political landscape. Trinidad paraphrases a Hawaiian elder who speaks about “place-based action”: “it’s not just being a bystander or having knowledge, it’s about becoming a mover and shaker—a leader within their community who is guided by the land and your responsibility” (Trinidad, 2009, p. 10). Trinidad (2009) writes that land becomes an important entity in sustaining our Indigenous identity and well-being, and that “place-based action” is deeply rooted within the Hawaiian culture: “In Hawaiian culture, the ‘aina (land) is what ‘feeds’ and ‘nourishes’ the community, and embodies a physical place of knowing. The ‘aina is a venue for
learning and being” (Trinidad, 2009, p. 11). Knowing the land and the cultural history is significant in establishing a sense of place and knowing; it provides a connection to the past and “grounding” with the present. It also defines for the youth who they are, where they come from and what is their purpose. “Place-based action” (re)builds community and (re)establishes the collective power of the people which results in healing, connecting to cultural identity and bringing forth well-being (Trinidad, 2009).

Martha Johnson & Robert A. Ruttan (1993) also speak to the relationship Native people have with the land and how this is central to our collective identity and well-being. They cite one of the Native participants in their research who speaks to the importance of land:

It is very clear to me that it is important and special thing to be an Indian. Being an Indian means being able to understand and live with this world in a very special way. It means living with the land, with the animals, with the birds and fish, as though they were your sisters and brothers. It means saying the land is an old friend and an old friend that your father knew, your grandfather knew, indeed your people always have known... we see our land as much, much more than the white man sees it. To the Indian people our land is really our life. Without our land we cannot—we could no longer exist as people. If our land is destroyed, we too are destroyed. If you people ever take our land, you will be taking our life. (Johnson & Ruttan, 1993, p. 194)
While Johnson & Ruttan (1993) do not speak to the idea of “activism” or “place based action” as Alfred (2005) and Trinidad (2009) do, Johnson & Ruttan brings forth the significant relationship which Indigenous people have with the land, which is an interconnection between our inner and outer worlds. This interconnection is the basis of our Aboriginal epistemology and our cosmology in which we were created. The premise of Indigenous consciousness and agency as a people is based in our epistemology and cosmology. Cree scholar and Professor Willie Ermine (1995) defines this as Aboriginal epistemology:

Aboriginal people found a wholeness that permeated inwardness and that also extended into the outer space. Their fundamental insight was that all existence was connected and that the whole enmeshed the being in its inclusiveness…. In the Aboriginal mind, therefore, an immanence is present that gives meaning to existence…. It is a mysterious force that connects the totality of existence – the forms, energies, or concepts that constitute the outer and inner worlds.

(Ermine, 1995, p. 103)

Freire (2000) refers to consciousness as “conscientizacao” which translates to “consciousness rising” or “critical consciousnesses.” This form of consciousness is the foundation which supports and mobilizes Native people in comprehending their place and responsibility in this world. Vanessa Watts (2013) describes the notion of Place-thought as “the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they
never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (p. 21). Therefore, Indigenous consciousness transcends back to the beginning of time—to creation and the thoughts of Sky Woman as she landed on the turtle’s back and created the earth, as well as to the thoughts of the animals that helped her. Consciousness also includes those non-human beings (water/streams, rocks/mountains, plants/trees, etc.) that learned long before the arrival of humans their duties and how to interact with each other; it connects back to when human beings were last to be created, and were put on this earth with a level of consciousness which connects to the consciousness of everything natural on and around our earth, and including the earth (Watts, 2013):

When thinking about agency with reference to Place-thought, where can it be located? I find it in animals, in humans, in plants, in rocks, etc. How did I come to think that these different entities and beings had agency in the first place? From stories/histories. For example, an event took place, perhaps, between a bear and a young woman and from this meeting an idea about a clan system came to be. Or maybe Three Sisters, named Corn, Beans and Squash decided to make an arrangement about how they would live together. Maybe it seems like I am telling stories but really I am commenting on two examples of historical events that took place in a particular location, at a particular
time, where consciousness, thought, desire, and the imagination of all individuals is in action. (Watts, 2013, p. 26)

Therefore, place-based thought is innate within us, interconnecting us with the outer world and the outer world connecting to us. Yet we as human beings also have a duty and a responsibility in our lives here on earth and that is to honour, protect and to appreciate everything living, including the earth (Watts, 2013). The Creator provided the Haudenosaunee people with the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen (Thanksgiving Address), as well as providing it to many other Indigenous people, as a way to carry out this responsibility of honour and gratitude.

Trinidad (2009) and Watts (2013) have brought forth two significant concepts for understanding the actions (place-based action) (Trinidad, 2009) and consciousness (place-based thought) (Watts, 2013) of Indigenous people’s responsibility to the earth/land and the natural environment. For Indigenous youth, this place-based action (Trinidad, 2009) and place-based thought (Watts, 2013) are intrinsic to who we are as a people whether we understand it or not—they connect on a deeper level within all of us. Therefore, they are the premise of our agency as a people. From a sociological perspective, Rob White & Johanna Wyn (1998) define agency as:

consciousness of the potential to take action, the willingness to engage in collective action in the interests of the group and, importantly, the knowledge and willingness to challenge existing structures. Thus, agency is about knowledge, power and the ability to activate
resources… agency is a continuous process, involving constant ebbs and flows depending upon immediate material circumstances and group dynamics. (1998, p. 318)

For Haudenosaunee and Indigenous peoples, Indigenous agency engages place-based consciousness and place-based action on a collective level. The above definition describes agency as “knowledge, power and the ability to activate resources” (White & Wyn, 1998); for Haudenosaunee people this understanding of agency permeates from our teachings, our collectivity as a people and our behaviors/actions.

Taking this idea of agency further, the Haudenosaunee would relate to “knowledge, power and the ability to activate resources” through our cultural consciousness and our teachings as a people. If we begin with the concept of “knowledge” within an Indigenous context, knowledge not only involves the information which we learn or gain through experience, it encompasses so much more. Knowledge can be related to the notion of “place-based thought” (Watts, 2013) as it connects to Indigenous epistemology and consciousness which is tied to our relationship with the land/earth and everything that has spirit (natural environment). From an Indigenous perspective, our knowledge is connected to the consciousness of our cosmologies, the earth, Creation, the Great Law of Peace, our Good Mind, etc. The same is true for the notion of “power” which is conceptualized much differently from a Haudenosaunee perspective than a Western perspective. “Power” is understood among the Haudenosaunee through the use of the “Good Mind” which is the ability to think and embrace within our being the understanding of our original teachings/ceremonies, our
values (compassion, honesty, generosity, fairness, sharing, integrity, responsibility, cooperation, openness, trustworthiness, responsiveness, etc.) and our understanding of peace through the Great Law. The “power” of the Good Mind begins with our consciousness and our connection with creation and it permeates out through our spirit and being through and into our language, behaviors and actions. The final area of the three points of social agency as described by White & Wyn (1998) is “the ability to activate resources” which relates to the Haudenosaunee notion of “righteousness” which is ability to use our “Good Mind” (actively engage our consciousness) and the Great Law of Peace (our source of knowledge) in everything that we do.

Trinidad (2009) presents the concept of “place-based action” and Watts’ (2013) the idea of “place-based thought”; these two notions in many instances are similar in connecting consciousness, Indigenous knowledge and the land. However, they both highlight a particular quality of either action or intellect as it relates to Indigenous knowledge and the land. Leilani Holmes (2000) refers to the Hawaiian concepts of “blood memory,” “heart knowledge” and “voices of the land.” Blood memory denotes the cultural and ancient knowledge which is passed down through the memory and experience of one generation to the next. In many Indigenous cultures, our Elders and grandparents possess that cultural knowledge and experience which sustains our identity and well-being as a people. Heart knowledge “surpasses the intellectual realm, and lodges itself in the emotional realm” (Holmes, 2000, p. 41), and speaks to the intrinsic and relational connections we have to our family members, friends and relatives. Finally, the “voices of the land” refers to the embedded knowledge or the consciousness which is grounded in our cosmology and the land. Holmes (2000) shares the views of her kupuna
(Elders) as they speak to the culture-based love and responsibility for the lands in which they reside:

*Aunty Lau* connects Hawaiian loss of land to Hawaiian loss of values and to inhumanity to others in the past; atonement will lead to social change. *Tutu Ohi’a* asserts that having recovered humility and Hawaiian practices and values, Hawaiians will move towards collective responsibility to one another and toward self-determination. The *kupuna* describe cultural practices, values, and conventions as *continuous* within their families—as having been passed down through the generations. Memories centre on the land as the basis for communal existence and translate into ethical imperatives. This lends Hawaiians an incredible amount of agency; it is not external power relations that bring about self-determination, but rather right action and inner integrity on the part of Hawaiians themselves. According to the *kupuna*, self-determination is tied to the notions of *lokahi* (together as one), *aloha ʻaina* (love of the land), and *malama ʻaina* (protection of the land). (Holmes, 2000, p. 47)

These kupunas (Elders) have articulated the approach to culture-based activism which I use to frame this dissertation. Culture-based activism is the cultural consciousness and action of Indigenous people as a collective which is based on the cultural frameworks of philosophy, cosmologies, spirituality, values and protocols of Indigenous people. It
acknowledges the love we have for the land, and as well holds the memories and history of our ancestors. As Indigenous people we acknowledge our responsibility in protecting the land and natural environment in order that all living things may continue, and that the next seven generations are provided with the same riches of the earth, environment and cultural knowledge long into the future.
Indigenous Well-being

The concept of well-being for an individual Native person is interconnected with the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains. Bill Mussell, Karen Cardiff and Jennifer White (2004) support this idea of well-being and add that it also includes the “optimal well-being” of the family, community and culture. Those families and communities who possess cultural values and beliefs, strong relational connections, and a connection to land and the natural environment contribute to development and health of a child. For Indigenous people, relationship with the natural environment is connected and reciprocal to our relations with each other, these relationships teach children about who they are and their place within the world, as well among their people.

For Indigenous peoples around the world, land and the web of relationships that the land sustains are at the heart of what it means to be ‘the people’ (as most Indigenous people conceptualize themselves, in their own languages). The land sustains the practices – fishing, hunting, planting, harvesting – through which people live. It also carries the stories, the songs, and the ceremonies, which in turn sustains language and teaches the children who they are as part of ‘the people’.

(Lawrence, 2010, p. 508)
The idea of “optimal well-being” is directly related to the cultural beliefs and practices which support a Native community’s connection to land and natural environment and which sustain their lives as a cultural people.

An Indigenous concept of wellness expands to include a relational domain which intersects not only with primary domains (physical, intellect, emotions and spirit) within all of us, but also connects “to the web of relationships” we have as a collective and the relationships we have with the natural world (Lawrence, 2010; Trimble et. al., 1984). Naomi Adelson (2002) explains that the Cree view health is known as “miyupimaatisiiun” or “being alive well”:

‘Being alive well’ constitutes what one may describe as being healthy; yet it is less determined by bodily functions than by the practices of daily living and by the balance of human relationships intrinsic to Cree lifestyles. ‘Being alive well’ means that one is able to hunt, to pursue traditional activities, to eat the right foods, and… to keep warm. This is above all a matter of quality of life. Quality of life is linked, in turn, to political and social phenomena that are as much a part of the contemporary Cree world as are the exigencies of ‘being alive well’… it is a focal point around which Cree articulate their sense of being and belonging… it is hardly surprising that it is through ‘being alive well’ that we see an articulation of physical, moral, political, and social forces that coalesce into a sense of Cree health, identity, and ultimately dissent. (Adelson, 2002, p. 14-15)
Adelson’s (2002) understanding and articulation of Cree health and well-being encompasses the cultural identity, connection with the land and the political agency of the people. For the Whapmagoostui people with whom Adelson (2002) conversed, “being alive well” concentrates on the development of identity around the cultural beliefs and practices which assert what it is to be or “being Cree.” “Being Cree” is the connection to Cree cosmology and history as well as the cultural understanding and appreciation of the land, the animals and the food they gather to sustain their health and well-being as a people and sustain their identity as “being Cree” (Adelson, 2002). The effects of colonization have had a great impact on the lives and well-being of Whapmagoostui people; as much as the Cree try to partake in the cultural lifestyle their ancestors once lived, returning to the bush for goose hunting and living off the land has been reduced to an insignificant amount of time and changed “what Cree do” (Adelson, 2002). Yet the spirit of the Cree is innate: “Without a doubt, the bush is a special place – both a space and a time for people to live outside the structures and constraints of the village” (Adelson, 2002, p. 108). Adelson (2002) shares the insight from one of her participants regarding well-being and the land:

When I am outside [in the bush], I feel a sense of well-being and I feel that being out there helps me a great deal in feeling well and fine. It also helps me to feel fine when I am doing the work that one does when one is in camp. The other thing that I have found out is that it helps one to be on the land because it is always clean and pure out on the
land. Wherever the person is, it is always clean and pure. That is what helps the person for his well-being. [sic] (Adelson, 2002, p. 109)

Wellness and well-being is directly connected to the land. Adelson (2002) shares the Cree understanding of “being alive well” which also includes a belief among the Cree in which dissent is articulated through the assertion of Cree culture and opposes the “the persistent encroachment of whiteman [sic] upon themselves and their land” (Adelson, 2002, p. 110). Therefore, well-being and identity are directly linked to “the ongoing struggle for voice and endurance in the world that has, over the years, muted and disenfranchised native people’s existence” (Adelson, 2002, p. 110). Identity is an important factor in the development of who are as individuals, as families and as nations.

Onkwehonwe Identity: Connection to Land, Earth and People

Devon A. Mihesuah (1998) defines “cultural identity” as “the cultural standards of a society to which one subscribes… [it] gives the individual a sense of a common past and of a shared destiny… culture unifies and integrates individuals, gives them a sense of belonging, and a sense of their own uniqueness as a people” (p. 195). Cultural identity also includes the values, beliefs, and worldviews of a people (Weaver, 2001; Berry, 1999). Hillary N. Weaver (2001) explains that identity is a “composite of many things such as race, class, education, region, religion, and gender” (p. 240). It is interesting that in this current day, many people relate to and/or internalize the various labels and categories which depict the attributes of their identity. Yet, Weaver (2001)
writes that “[m]ost theorists agree that identity exists, not solely within an individual or
category of individuals but through difference in relationship with others” (p. 242). I
would partially agree with Weaver (2001) that Native identity is based on those values of
respect, balance and diversity which is the basis of relationship and collectivity
(Venables, 2010). However, identity among Indigenous people is far more in-depth than
cultural values and the difference of a people. John W. Berry (1999) shares Heni
Tajfel’s (1982) concept of social identity and the importance and influence
collective/social identity has on the self-esteem of an individual: social identity is “that
part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from one’s knowledge of one’s
membership in a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional
significance attached to that membership. That is, there are both knowledge (perceptual)
and evaluation (affective) aspects of social identity” (Berry, 1999, p. 3). Therefore, the
notion of identity is closely linked to the sense of attachment, and this attachment can
include the natural environment and the earth.

The Haudenosaunee are known as the “People of the Longhouse” (Venables,
2010) or more accurately “People building a Longhouse.” The cultural identity of the
Haudenosaunee follows the lineage of the mother and is indicated by clan and nation
(McCarthy, 2010). While the Haudenosaunee people are a matrilineal people, their social
structure may appear to be matriarchal due to the socio-political responsibilities
Haudenosaunee women have in overseeing and caring for the children, community and
the land. Robert W. Venables (2010) challenges the binary notion of a gendered social
structure and says that while the Haudenosaunee may appear as a matriarchal society, it is
a far more intricate society than many believe. The notions of matriarchy and patriarchy
are Eurocentric and American views describing opposing and conflicting systems of power and gender (Venables, 2010). The Haudenosaunee believe in and strive for egalitarianism within their society based on their cultural philosophy and the Great Law of Peace which is supported by their cultural values, therefore alleviating the struggle for power. Through their cultural philosophy and the Great Law, the Haudenosaunee know that everything on earth has a responsibility and duty, and one form of life is not superior over another. Venables (2010) explains:

The Haudenosaunee believe that all life forms, including human beings, are equal and that all life forms have equal spiritual consciousness—“souls”.... All these life forms have different functions. “Female” and “male” are only categories within the wider range of differences. Because all life forms are equal, all life forms must be equally respected, and thus the world functions through reciprocity. All forms in the world are therefore interdependent. Because differences among all beings contribute to an interdependent whole, the differences among beings are not “separate” functions. While all life forms are equal, all beings maintain different spheres of responsibility, different functions. Thus the roles of men and women were – and are – “different and equal,” not “separate but equal”.... The Haudenosaunee worldview begins with the idea that each human being and every other being are exactly who the Creator intended. Every being has an equal soul; every being is equal; and every being has a divinely mandated, different
function. Thus the Haudenosaunee worldview applies to all life, not just human life. (Venables, 2010, p. 26-27)

The relationship the Haudenosaunee people have to land and place is understood by the spiritual and physical connections of their cosmologic account of the creation of the earth and the land they live upon (McCarthy, 2010). Haudenosaunee scholar Theresa McCarthy (2010) shares her conversation with the late Chief Jake Thomas as he spoke to the importance of the earth and our identity: “if you go back to the time of Creation, when the Creator made mankind, he made them by molding them from the earth—that’s why we call it O:gwehó:weh. O:gweh is what we are from... O:gweh means the real thing from mother earth—that's what we are” (p. 85).

Identity among Indigenous people is firmly rooted in the connections to the land, and in some instances to the sea (Kana’iaupuni & Malone, 2006) and fresh waters: “As a subsistence society, living off the natural resources of the land was fundamental to the social identities of Native Hawaiians, [an]... intimate relationship in the reciprocal nature of caring for the land (mēlama ‘āina) as it cares for the people, much like a family bond” (Kana’iaupuni & Malone, 2006, pp. 289-290). A study completed by Hawaiian scholars Shawn Malia Kana’iaupuni and Nolan Malone (2006) draws on the Indigenous perspectives of the spiritual and the physicality of place and identity as they are understood through the traditions and practices of the Indigenous Hawaiian people. The authors indicate that identity and place is not expressed by means of “difference in relationship” as articulated by Weaver (2001), but is focussed on the connection to the land (and the water) by means of “physical, spiritual, genealogical and historical forces”
Kana’aiapuni and Malone (2006) state that the relationship between Indigenous people and place is the “sharing of being: Places carry the energies of people, history, and cultural significance; in turn, people carry the energy of places as some part of their being” (p. 283). The authors also reaffirm that the bond that many Indigenous societies have with the land is reciprocated through their cultural practices and expresses that the “voices call to the spirit, to the body, to the memory of cells and DNA... [and tells us that] ‘Our mother is our land’” (p. 293). In most Indigenous cultures, when a child is born their umbilical cord and the afterbirth is planted in the earth; as well when a person dies their physical body is returned to the land (Kana’aiapuni & Malone, 2006). Therefore, our lives begin in and return back to the land. Venables (2010) also expresses the sentiments of this concept, “the people are of the land, and the land the people” to the Haudenosaunee who are constantly reminded that the next generation is waiting to be born and that the “children of all beings – is just beneath the surface of the ground looking up at the current generation” (p. 41).

The construction of Onkwehonwe identity within many Indigenous societies is clearly based on their relationship with and responsibility to the land and natural environment—it is a way of being (McCarthy, 2010). A reminder of this relationship between the natural world and our identity is structured through the systems of clans. Clans are represented by animal totems of an Indigenous nation’s particular region and landscape of the earth. The association with a clan defines the nation and citizenship of a people, as well defines their place within ceremonial and cultural events (McCarthy, 2010). McCarthy (2010) cites Mohawk historian Deborah Doxtator’s dissertation *What Happened to the Iroquois Clans?: A Study of Clans in Three Nineteenth-Century*
*Rotinonhsyonni Communities*, in explaining the linkage between the Haudenosaunee, the earth and the system of clans:

Deborah Doxtator argued that the English term *clan* is misleading and provides an elaboration of land, space and place as the conceptual basis for Haudenosaunee clans. “The word *otara* in Mohawk,” she explains, “means land, clay or earth as well as clan and in asking an individual what clan they belong to (*oh nisen ’taroten*), one is literally asking ‘what is the outline or contour of your clay?’ referring to the land you can access and the territory to which you belong.... Land relationships are the basis of understanding clans and political structures”.... Haudenosaunee clans are constituted in “patterns of activity” rooted in place, territory, and ecology. Belonging to a clan is processual and actualized in everyday life through living relationships and responsibilities. These relationships and responsibilities are reciprocally connected to land and emanated outward to incorporate the reciprocal relationships and responsibilities of the Haudenosaunee to each other. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 85)

The clan system creates balance, equality and boundaries between families, nations and Indigenous societies. If a clan family requires help or is grieving a death, the system is structured to assist and uplift the family or clan which requires the support of the collective (McCarthy, 2010).
Another aspect of identity discussed in the literature is the negotiation of two cultures. Michael Tlanusta Garrett (1996) stresses that Native youth are able to attain a level of bicultural competence (Native traditionalism and the acculturation into dominant society) as they move through the developmental stages of attaining a bicultural identity (personal identity, choice, denial/confusion, appreciation, integration). Garrett (1996) shares his own personal reflections and experience as he navigated “the enculturation, of a traditional Indian way of life, and acculturation to mainstream values, beliefs, and expectations” (Garrett, 1996, p. 11) to obtain this dual identity. However, what Garrett (1996) does not elaborate on are the difficulties many youth currently face in regards to racism, stereotyping, oppression, invisibility, etc. as a Native person. In addition, Garrett (1996) should provide a cautionary explanation regarding the challenges for Native people as they attempt to move through such difficult stages as denial and confusion. Not having a clear account as to how an individual should move beyond the stage of denial and confusion may contribute to creating more difficulties in a person’s life.

Some of these difficulties regarding Native identity stem from socially constructed Eurocentric ideas and theories which have politicized past and present day colonization (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). Native identity constructed through government policies has perpetuated the colonial violence, oppression and the eventual erasure of original peoples from this land and earth. According to Kana’iaupuni & Malone, “Identity is not simply a subjected cognitive process, but one subjected to external biases, intentional misrepresentation, and political tactics” (2006, p. 300). Kana’iaupuni & Malone (2006) contend that imperialism, power and capitalism have been at the root of destroying, tearing away and disassembling the connection Indigenous
people have with the land and their identity. Unfortunately for many individuals and families, the lineage which defines their family or clan has been lost and or skewed due to the assimilation and acculturation strategies and policies enforced by the government (McCarthy, 2010; Alfred & Cornassel, 2005; Lawrence, 2003). Legislation such as the Indian Act continues to perpetuate paternalistic views which dismantles the social structures of Native societies and replaces it with a gendered and subordinate view of Native identity (Lawrence, 2003). Once government policies, residential schools, and other forms of oppression began to overtake Native communities, many individuals and families internalized this new structure of identity and put aside their culture to ensure that their children would not endure the traumatic abuses they as children endured (Berry, 1999). Freire (2000) explains that the external oppression experienced by the oppressed is internalized, thus contributing to a distorted and negative view in the psyche of a person and people. An example of this is when Native people and groups experience racism, stereotyping, and marginalization from the dominate society based on cultural identity; this negativity transfers on to the self-esteem and consciousness of that person or group of people (Berry, 1999; Garrett, 1996). In some cases, the oppressed become the oppressor of their own people (Freire, 2000).

It is important to note that few Haudenosaunee families have passed on their knowledge regarding their Indigenous system of identity (clan, nation, naming) from one generation to another (McCarthy, 2010). This is due to the generations of colonization and governments imposing strategies to alienate Native people from their identity and ties to the land. As the government continues even to this day in forcing Native people to define themselves by legislation framed within a governmental context, it puts a strain
on the relationships and knowledges Native people have with and for the land and natural environment (McCarthy, 2010). For Native peoples in North America, our territory/land and natural environment connected us to our cultural consciousness (creation stories, ceremonies, language, etc.) on a wholistic level, which secures our identity within our nations. Unfortunately, many of our Native people now define their “cultural identity” not in terms of our relationships with the land as we once did, but by the cultural labels and government definitions that have been imposed upon us (Lawrence, 2003). The question is then, how do we reclaim our sovereign right to our identity as Kanien’keha or Anishnabe? Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (2005) express that the transcendence from colonization for Indigenous people begins on an individual level and reverberates outward to family, clan, community and broader relationships which form the existence of Native people (p. 612): “In this way, Indigenousness is reconstructed, reshaped and actively lived as resurgence against the dispossessing and demeaning processes of annihilation that are inherent to colonialism” (2005, p. 612). Elizabeth J. Tisdell & Derise E. Tolliver (2003) agree with Alfred & Corntassel (2005) that development of identity is a transformative process which incorporates spirituality in attaining understanding and acceptance of self through lived experience:

Identity development is seen as a continuous process of interaction between the individual and the sociocultural milieu, a holistic approach encompassing all aspects of self…. As individuals increase their self-understandings and remember their spiritual essences, they transcend
the bondage of oppressions. This can result in action supporting social transformation. Sociopolitical development is seen as a transformational process that reflects the emergence of a critical consciousness around oppressions and social injustices… spirituality is seen as critical to liberation activity. A higher purpose funnels the drive to work for social transformation and education is seen as critical to the personal transformation process. (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003, pp. 373-374)

Bonita Lawrence (2003) articulates the importance of Native people understanding how their identity has been constructed and regulated within a colonial framework to aid in “step[ing] away from the colonizing frameworks that have enmeshed our lives... as we struggle to revive the identities and ways of living that preceded colonization” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 4). Alfred & Corntassel (2005) contend that if we are to recover our freedom, power and happiness as a people, we need to transcend colonization through our cultural knowledge: “We do not need to wait for the colonizer to provide us with money or to validate our vision for a free future; we only need to start to use our Indigenous languages to frame our thoughts, the ethical framework of our philosophies to make decisions and to use our laws and institutions to govern ourselves” (p. 614). Wexler (2009) agrees with Alfred and Corntassel (2005) and concludes that the well-being of Indigenous youth is to be achieved through the grounding and stabilizing of cultural identity through understanding the past and present. Doing so provides Native youth
with a connection to the personal and collective continuity and resilience which contributes to cultural well-being (Berry, 1999).

An Indigenous perspective of well-being encompasses a broader view of wholistic health and well-being to include the social and natural worlds of an individual, family and community. It must be noted that well-being is not the same for Cree as it would be for Haudenosaunee, Lakota or Haida Gwaii. The point being stressed here is that Indigenous people define and construct well-being and identity according to their relationships with the natural environment and the land, their worldviews, spirituality, cultural values and beliefs, as well as their social and political structures which support the protection of their well-being (Trimble, et. al., 1984; Adelson, 2002).

Marie Roué’s (2006) study involves the Cree community in Chisasibi who developed a bush camp program after reflecting on the problems and abuses that their youth endured in their schools. It was determined by the Chisasibi community that those youth who were at risk of crisis situations or were dangerous to themselves and their communities would be sent to a bush camp program (Roué, 2006). Roué’s research explains that from a Cree perspective many of these youth needed to be on the land, immersed back into the culture and the traditional ways of the Cree to ground themselves as Cree persons. A Cree elder involved with this program, Robbie Matthew, explains that when these young men and women go on the land they are searching for who they are and this quest is spiritually based (Roué, 2006):

By going on the land of their ancestors, they receive from their elders the spiritual bond to the land that by accident their own parents were unable to
transmit to them. Suffice it for me to describe how a very young man—a rebel in great suffering—lived through a spiritual experience with his great-uncle which, according to his own family, radically transformed him. (Roué, 2006, p. 20)

Roué (2006) concludes that the impact of cultural programs and bush camps is to transform Native youth into knowing who they are. Programs such as these also show and connect Native youth to their spirituality and reveal that they are a small entity in this large world with a great human responsibility. Through this awareness they learn from their Elders the cultural knowledge of respect for the land, natural environment and themselves, learn how to work collaboratively and contribute the collective because their survival depends upon what they do, and learn how to be a citizen of their Cree nation. By learning and working with their cultural knowledge, Native youth re-establish their identity within their nation. Bush camps and cultural programs such as these increase the self-esteem and confidence of Native youth while teaching them how to take care of themselves and replenish their well-being by means of their culture. Parents and families see the change in their youth and express how their children “now like to walk, to share the work with us; they have changed. Before they didn’t know what to do, and they weren’t doing anything… [but] sleep[ing] all day” (Roué, 2006, p. 23). Programs such as these which incorporate cultural knowledge, skills, and spirituality through the connection of culture and land, transform and connect Native youth back to their identity and collective lineage (Roué, 2006). Such approaches heal the spirit of the youth and provide cultural resiliency for their family and community.
Cultural identity and well-being are directly connected to the resilience of an individual (Wexler, 2009), and grow as a person experiences and learns about themselves through attaining cultural values, beliefs and a worldview which sustains them in the larger context of the world (McGuire, 2010).

Native Youth Resiliency

The term “resiliency” often refers to the notion of “risk and adversity” based within the fields of psychology and human development (Kirmayer et al., 2011). A common definition from these fields is that resiliency is an “extent to which someone can recover from adversity…. More recently, the term has been used to describe an individual’s ability to manage or cope with significant adversity or stress in effective ways” (Dell, et. al., 2005, p. 5). While this definition could be applied to many Indigenous people and communities, this understanding of resiliency does not consider the cultural philosophy and values of Indigenous people. Iris Heavy Runner & Kathy Marshall (2003) articulate that resilience within Indigenous communities is based within the culture and refers to this notion as cultural resilience, which is the natural, human capacity to navigate life well. It is something every human being has—wisdom, common sense. It means coming to know how you think, who you are spiritually, where you come from, and where you are going. The key is learning how to utilize resilience, which is the birthright of every human being. It involves understanding our inner spirit and finding a sense of direction. (p. 14)
Joyce A. Stand and Robert Peacock (2003) published an annotated bibliography resource guide on “cultural resilience” in working with Native communities and explain that “the use of traditional life-ways to overcome the negative influences of oppression, abuse, poverty, violence, and discrimination” (http://www.tribalcollegejournal.org/archieves/11560) contribute to supporting the strength and well-being of Native people. John Fleming & Robert J. Ledogar (2008) write that a level of growth or transformation occurs within the individual after confronting adversity, indicating that resilience is innate (McGuire, 2010) and that it needs to be properly awakened (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008, p. 17). Kirmayer et al. (2011) explain through their Roots of Resilience project that notions of resilience are grounded in culturally distinctive concepts (natural environment, collective history, language and cultural practices) which draw on the agency and activism of individuals through the collective. Kirmayer et al. (2011) also explain that clinical interventions that include culture-related resources such as narratives can help repair the ruptures of cultural continuity which have been suppressed and disrupted in Indigenous culture and identity by means of colonization. In a sense, resilience contributes to the process of decolonization for Native people. Traditional “stories that are built around culturally informed notions of personhood that link the individual to the community (both past and present) and to the land and environment” (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. 89) strengthen the efficacy within an individual. “Aboriginal perspectives tell us that much of what seems to promote resilience originates outside the individual” (Kirmayer, et. al, 2011, p. 89). Therefore, Indigenous resilience is based on a much broader perspective which
incorporates spirituality and connection to ancestral knowledge and epistemologies. Indigenous resilience involves the relationships with collective/people through cultural practices, stories of our cosmology and history (Wexler, 2009), as well as being physically connected with the land and natural environment by walking/running, canoeing, camping, horseback riding (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; McGuire, 2010). Patricia D. McGuire - Kishebakabaykwe (2010) writes that Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices are the basis of Indigenous people and youth beginning to decolonize and reconnect through their cultural and spiritual experience with “being on the land,” “being in the bush” or “being on the water”:

Social realities reflected in indigenous knowledge(s) can create knowledge that sets the basis for social transformation and empowerment in indigenous societies. Examining Anishinaabe resilience that may be based on land could be a starting point in this process. Examining aspects if indigenous resilience can be helpful ideas and practices for the current decolonizing efforts in Aboriginal communities. In the sociology of knowledge, theories are developed by people within a social context participating in their social worlds. Indigenous theories can be developed that offer a mirror in which indigenous people see themselves reflected back. (McGuire, 2010, p. 127)
Tarama Marshall’s (2011) Master’s research provides an insight into cultural resilience through an ethnographic study that looked at the impact of a canoe journey by eighteen Coastal Salish youth, elders and adults involved with the Kw’umut Lelum Child and Family Services program, Tribal Journeys. This journey’s purpose was to connect youth with cultural traditions and encourage social interactions with the natural environment, family and community on a physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual level. The Tribal Journey is an annual Pacific Northwest Native ocean canoe journey which involves thousands of participants from Canada and the United States (Marshall, 2011): “At the end, participants gather in the community of the hosting nation or tribe for up to a week of ceremonial protocols, feasting, and traditional celebrations” (Marshall, 2011, p. 23).

Marshall’s (2011) study consisted of daily observations and conversations over a two-week period while participating in ceremonies, feasts, paddling alongside the youth, camping, caring for the canoe, nightly talking circles and learning from the elders about Coastal Salish culture and their protocols as a non-Indigenous person involved with this journey. Her findings emphasized that cultural resiliency for Kw’umut Lelum youth, include: “1) Tribal Journeys can be considered a modern-day rite of passage; 2) Relational interactions with people and place are integral to Tribal Journeys; 3) Traditions and teachings are communicated through journey interactions and actions; 4) The Great Canoe is a ‘live’ vessel that can connect people and Indigenous traditions” (Marshall, 2011, p. 85). According to one participant, “The journey is never over…. This is just the beginning” (Wesley Nahane quoted in Marshall, 2011, p. 84).
Colleen Dell et al. (2005; 2008) find similarities between traditional Native teachings and the Western clinical model of resilience in the approach of two Native youth treatment centres in Saskatchewan. By finding the similarities between the two perspectives, professionals in the two treatment facilities are able to engage Native youth through their cultural worldview in how to cope with stress and adversity as they heal and rebuild their lives, connect to spirituality and community, and become aware of their inner strength as Native people (Dell et al., 2005). Dell et al. (2005; 2008) revise Wolins’ Seven Resiliency Traits in matching the Native traditional values and teachings. The chart below illustrates the commonalities between the two perspectives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wolins’ Resiliency Traits</th>
<th>Traditional Native Teachings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Interconnectedness; respect; humility; faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>Teasing as acceptance and welcome; balance the seriousness of life; facilities learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Survival; tool making; continuance of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Personal courage; integrity; freedom; autonomy; promotes wholeness and quality of life for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Kinship; sharing; unconditional love; generosity; community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Mastery; taking on of adult roles; courage; non-interference; reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insight</td>
<td>Vision quest/fast; strength; knowing self in relation to all else; identify development in relation to gender, spirit name and clan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resiliency Traits Chart, in Dell, et. al., 2005, p. 6
The incorporation of Native values and teachings into a treatment model (sweat lodge ceremony, vision quests, fasting, horses, Elders, etc.) provides Native youth the opportunity to (re)acquaint themselves with their culture, thus building self-esteem and confidence within the youth. The results were favorable, and the researchers report that the Native youth who participated in the “cultural resilience” treatment achieved continued abstinence from drugs and alcohol after six months (Dell, et. al., 2005).

In their public health research, Lisa Marin Wexler, Gloria DiFluvio & Tracey K. Burke (2009) argue that cultural identity and well-being that is supported by enculturation is important in establishing the collective meaning and resilience of Native youth. The authors express the importance and impact cultural identity has on well-being for Native youth:

A strong sense of cultural identity has been correlated with higher levels of psychological health for Indigenous youth…. Having a positive cultural identity is believed to confer feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, connectedness, and purpose to Indigenous young people… a strong cultural identity distinguishes a Native young person from dominant society and offers him or her a way to positively understand this difference. This understanding can make prejudice and injustice visible, and in doing so, makes their personal experiences of oppression relevant in a larger context…. (Wexler, DiFluvio & Burke, 2009, p. 568)
Bringing the awareness of discrimination, oppression, etc. from a personal level to a collective and broader context mobilizes Native youth through this shared sense of purpose by challenging the broader structures of society (Wexler, DiFluvio & Burke, 2009). Theresa D. O’Nell’s (1996) research explores the notion of emotion and agency among the Flathead Salishan tribes of Montana’s First Nations people, and discovered that emotion prompts sociopolitical actions within First Nations communities. O’Nell (1996) writes that

> turning an eye to the culturally constituted domains within which emotion has an integral role in establishing agency and social action, we may discover a “psychological” dynamics that has as much to do with sociopolitical processes of history, ethnic identity, and family relations as it does with processes of autonomy, self-actualization, or self-esteem. (p. 215)

Therefore, an underlying motivation for culture-based activism is a sense of purpose. This sense of purpose connects to the emotional understanding of the collective past and a sense of responsibility for the future. For Native people, this purpose may be an acknowledgment of the social injustices and historical trauma they have experienced. But it also raises our consciousness in order to act according to our responsibilities and teachings as a people (Taylor, 1996). Wexler, DiFluvio & Burke (2009) also observed that culture and a sense of belonging to the collective are the foundation for formulating a
strong and healthy identity and establishing well-being. The authors found that resilience in Native youth increased by connecting meaning-making from a personal level to a broader context of adversity, therefore providing a rational or reason for their social agency at a collective level (Wexler, DiFluvio & Burke, 2009). Nonetheless, the sense of purpose, resilience and mobilizing to action not only strives towards transforming society on a broader level, but sets in motion growth and transformation at the individual level by being immersed within the experience (O’Nell, 1996).

**The Positive Development of Native Youth**

Heather Lewis-Charp et al. (2006) argue that if we expect our young people to develop into citizens who are engaged with and active in solving socio-political issues and problems, we then need to support youth programs which raise their consciousness (p.33).

When young people have opportunities to engage in real-world learning and apply their cognitive and critical thinking skills on problems and policies that matter to them, civic engagement and leadership development take on new meaning. We cannot continue to express dismay about disconnected and alienated youth populations while at the same time keeping adolescents and young adults outside meaningful decision-making opportunities... youth participants are seriously engaged in critical reflection about themselves and their society, uniting with their peers in positive collective action against social injustices,
and engaging community leaders to see uncommon and innovative solutions to chronic problems in our society. (Lewis-Charp et al., 2006, pp. 32 - 33)

I believe that youth-led initiatives with the support of adults, authorities and communities provide youth with a sense of independence, ownership, responsibility, and belonging within their community. The engagement of youth in any program or activity can take many different forms or approaches. Trinidad (2004) explains that practitioners and agencies can engage youth in a number of ways: 1) youth involved minimally or not at all, totally adult driven; 2) youth consulted and decisions shared, but adult driven; 3) youth-initiated and directed, adults not involved; and finally, 4) youth-initiated with decisions and actions shared with adults (Trinidad, 2010, p. 4). There are many agencies and programs which value youth and the development of skills and leadership by including youth as staff, as board members, on steering committees, etc. (Lewis-Charp et al., 2006).

The theoretical framework of “positive youth development” (PYD) provides opportunity for youth to develop leadership and life skills which will be an asset as they move forward with their education, employment, raising their own family, and being an asset to development of their community. Den Yelle B. Kenyon & Jessica D. Hanson (2012) defines “positive youth development” as a positive socialization to build on youth’s strengths in order to improve health and well-being and prevent high-risk behaviors such as substance
abuse, violence, and school dropout. Another centerpiece of PYD involves efforts to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors through structured activities that focus on skill building and developing competencies in various contexts. An additional key component of PYD is to increase support for youth in their homes, schools and communities by providing opportunities to build relationships with caring adults and prosocial peers. The overarching goal is to create a safe environment for engaging youth in positive relationships and activities instead of focusing on “fixing” youth’s problems. (Kenyon & Hanson, 2012, pp. 273-274)

Kenyon & Hanson (2012) note that culture is not just an add-on to the theoretical framework of positive youth development; people working with youth need to understand the history, the culture and the root causes that contribute to many of current disparities Native communities are experiencing. Reed W. Larson (2000) focuses on the quality of “adolescents’ development of initiative” as a core quality of positive youth development and explains that the “construct initiative is closely related to capacity for agency or for autonomous action.... It consists of the ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal” (Larson, 2000, p. 170). Therefore qualities such as creativity, leadership, altruism and civic engagement are also core requirements in the positive development of youth (Larson, 2000). Larson identifies three elements which are crucial for the development of initiative by adolescents. The first involves the “intrinsic motivation” of wanting to be part of the initiative. The second
element is defined as “concerted engagement with the environment.” From an Indigenous perspective, this element could be interpreted as returning to and living off the land and within the natural environment (Larson, 2000). Larson also indicates that this second element includes the complexity, action, rules and challenges which youth undertake as they engage with the environment. The final and third element is described as “temporal arc” or arcing of time in completing the goal. Larson explains that adolescents have a higher completion when the goal(s) have shorter timeframes. However it is important to be aware of possible setbacks, adjustments, and (re)evaluations associated with shorter timeframes that could have stressful implications on the youth in completing the goal.

Larson (2000) analyzed the notions of positive youth development with the land-based program of Outward Bound and discovered that research in this particular area has produced a compelling body of evidence regarding the positive effects on adolescence development. Larson indicates that many scholars critiqued this research citing the lack of theoretical framework, as well the lack of attention to the process by which positive youth development occurs. Despite this critique, Larson insists on the importance and positive results of social engagement among the youths’ peer group involved with the Outward Bound activities, as well as the significance of civic engagement, as contributing factors in the positive formation of an adolescent identity. This research identified elements of positive youth development but it did not discuss the importance of Native culture, cultural knowledge, spirituality or experiential learning (Larson, 2000). Kenyon & Hanson’s (2012) and Trinidad’s (2009 & 2011) research studies went beyond the “development of initiative” described by Larson (2000); by integrating traditional
Native cultural practices and Indigenous knowledge with the psychological theory of “positive youth development” this research expands on this theory to a wholistic level which includes the physical, spiritual, and social/collective aspects which are imperative in the cultural survival of Native families and communities.

Kenyon & Hanson (2012) explain that positive youth development focuses on building what they refer to as the six C’s, in youth: “competence, confidence, connection, character, caring and contribution” (p. 274). In addition, positive youth development has demonstrated that there is a positive cumulative effect of development assets in youth’s lives. Developmental assets include internal strengths (i.e., commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity) and external strengths (i.e., support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time). The more internal and external strengths youth possess, the more likely they are to have positive indicators of health (e.g., eating nutritious foods and exercising...), academic success and decreased numbers of risk behaviours (e.g., alcohol/drug use, violent behavior, unprotected sexual intercourse...). (Kenyon & Hanson, 2012, p. 274)

Kenyon & Hanson’s (2012) research on resilience with Native people produced evidence which supports the engagement of culture and values, Native worldviews, and engagement in cultural practices as protective factors for youth. The authors provide a
strong rationale regarding PYD with Indigenous youth and discuss the importance of spirituality as defining character, strengthening cultural identity and well-being through cultural healing and counselling, and in building relationships. Kenyon & Hanson (2012) stressed that “culture became the program instead of just being an ‘add-on’” (p. 275), and that PYD and cultural activities can take many forms, such as learning Native language, participating in ceremonies, learning history and culture, creating traditional art and craftwork, and engaging in traditional sports (lacrosse). In addition, the authors review various programs which incorporated cultural teachings, Elders, family members and community and found an increase in the youths’ cultural identity, sense of belonging, and wholistic well-being. The two outdoor cultural experiential educational programs also produced a positive impact on those youth who participated through the connection with the land and natural environment (Kenyon & Hanson, 2012). Yet, the authors expressed that there were few Native community programs which deem PYD as best practices particularly in the areas of substance abuse and mental health services (Kenyon & Hanson, 2012).

The notion of positive youth development provides an understanding of how to engage Indigenous youth in actively participating in their community on a socio-political level through the development of life skills and leadership. This theoretical approach offers a perspective of understanding and building upon the strengths and resiliency which youth possess. Positive youth development may also assist in understanding the processes by which Haudenosaunee youth develop through their experience with the Unity Run.
This chapter reviewed various parts of the literature and articulated how these different parts fit together and inform this research. Native people and youth are traveling across the land and sea not only to connect with their culture, spirituality and the natural environment—they are also seeking Indigenous ways for healing, autonomy and social justice. Such localized and national movements are transforming individuals in a wholistic manner (physically, cognitive, emotional, socially and spiritually). Therefore, culture-based activism takes an Indigenous cultural praxis (reflection/consciousness and action) as an approach towards decolonization and understanding the resilience and agency which contributes to the transformation of identity and well-being in Native youth.

The following chapters of this dissertation embark on a research study involving the Haudenosaunee youth and their parents/adult supporters who journeyed with the Unity Run from 2005 to 2008 to (re)connect to their Onkwehonwe identity and well-being through cultural knowledge and practices, while striving for peace, unity, and social justice for their people.
Chapter 3: An Indigenous Path to Researching the Spirit of Youth

Introduction

This section explores the understanding and importance of wholistic knowledge (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual) in learning and developing an Indigenous qualitative research paradigm, while addressing the resiliency and agency of Native youth participating in cultural journeys and social activism.

Indigenous Qualitative Research Paradigm

This journey and research is based on an Indigenous qualitative research paradigm that conceptualizes the notion of Indigenous knowledge and research (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009) as Kaandossiwin (Anishnabe) or “how we come to know” (Absolon, 2011). Dr Erica-Irene Daes (cited in Marie Battiste and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson, 2004) expresses in her report to the United Nations that

Indigenous knowledge is a complete knowledge system with its own epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and logical validity… [and] can only be understood by means of pedagogy traditionally employed by the people themselves… [with] the role of land or ecology… [as] central and [an] indispensable classroom. (Battiste & Henderson, 2004, p. 41)
For many generations, Native people have been critically analyzed through a Eurocentric lens which has scrutinized the values, beliefs and culture of Aboriginal people. This dissertation will shift the way we look at and overcome problems by undertaking a conceptual framework that is rooted in Indigenous knowledge and epistemology (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) in the area of social work, as well as contribute and support the work of other Native scholars, cultural knowledge carriers and Elders. I will do this by using Haudenosaunee stories and cultural practices such as the Creation story, the coming of the Peacemaker and the Kayanaren’kó:wa (The Great Law), as well as the Ohenton Karihwa:tkwen (Thanksgiving Address). Sadie Buck (2010) explains that “As Haudenosaunee people we cannot take only one aspect of our knowledge in an attempt to understand our cultural lifestyle as a whole, our philosophy and epistemology is sustained by how we live and conduct our lives according to our teachings provided to us by our Creator” (Personal Communication, 2010). The late Cayuga linguist Reginald Henry developed an illustration relating to the formation of Haudenosaunee thought and philosophy over time (Diamond, 2008, p 17).
This system of knowledge was spiritually based and was well established several thousand years prior to the arrival of early settlers. It is important for us as academics, social workers and professionals to understand that we cannot compartmentalize or deconstruct Native philosophy due to the spiritual level in which it is based (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Absolon, 2011). The same is true with Haudenosaunee philosophy of the Ohenton Karihwat'ehkwén (The Words Before Anything Else), also known as the Thanksgiving Address, which is at the beginning of this document and which reminds us to appreciate all that is living, the land, natural resources, the animals, the spiritual entities, and that all these living entities have a roles and responsibilities within Creation. The stories of Creation and the Peacemaker demonstrate to Onkwehonwe people the importance of our values and principles, roles and responsibilities, social structures and governance as a nation of people. Oren Lyons, a faith keeper for the Onondaga people

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and an academic, articulates the importance of spirituality and the respect that is critical to the political and social welfare of the Haudenosaunee:

we are told that our first and most important duty is to see that the spiritual ceremonies are carried out. Without ceremonies, one does not have a basis on which to conduct government for the welfare of the people. This is not only for our people but for the good of all living things in general…. Whether it is the growing life of trees, plants or animals, or whether it is human, all life is equal…. We believe it is equal because we are spiritual people. If a tree is standing there, then the Creator must have put it there, and if the Creator has put it there, then you must respect it. If a person is sitting there, obviously the Creator has made this person; therefore, you must respect the person. If we are to put this belief into practice, then we must protect life and all its manifestations. (Lyons, 1984, p. 5-6)

These tenets proved important in the lives and existence of the Haudenosaunee. The purpose of The Great Law of Peace is to unify the people and to “use the mind to create peace, power and righteousness” (Mohawk, 1986, p. xvii). The Great Law of Peace ensures the overall welfare of the people. It provides a foundational framework towards rational behavior and thinking to benefit the collectivity of the people (Mohawk, 1986). Oren Lyons (1992) writes that “the Peacemaker instilled in the nations the inherent rights of the individual with the process to protect and exercise these rights” (p. 32). The principles of Kayanaren’kó:wa (The Great Law of Peace) include Indigenous
perspectives and methods for consensus building, equal rights and leadership, roles and responsibilities, freedom and independence using our Good Mind, the respect, compassion and gratitude we have for everything around us, and representation and democracy for all people. Indigenous knowledge has always surrounded us and continues to, whether we acknowledge it or not. Yet when we as Native people are in search of knowing who we are due to generations of traumatic experiences imposed on our lives, we begin a connection to our epistemology through our culture.

In their chapter “Putting Ourselves Forward: Location in Aboriginal Research,” Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett (2008) discuss the significance of consciously inserting a hyphen between the prefix “re” and the word “search” to articulate an Indigenous consciousness and notion of the search for knowledge and connection which is already there. Re-search within an Indigenous context has an interconnected relationship with and belief in Native people’s epistemology: it acknowledges how we as a people “come to know” (Absolon, 2011). Kaandossiwin (Absolon, 2011) or “coming to know again” is a process which reciprocates our efforts in seeking knowledge, but also provides us with opportunities that allow us to grow and know. Dawn Martin-Hill et al. (2008) write that a framework of Indigenous inquiry engages a wholistic paradigm drawing “on the emotional, spiritual, physical and mental well-being of a people” (p. 60) as it is built upon our relationship with the spiritual and natural worlds and is reflected through the discourse of our Native languages and expression of our cultural practices. Martin-Hill et al. (2008) argue that Indigenous people move beyond the attachment to land: “Our epistemology and consciousness is informed by the Creator and shaped by the land” (p. 60). Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant-Castellano (2000) states that Indigenous knowledge
“derives from multiple sources, including traditional teachings, empirical observation, and revelation” (Brant-Castellano, cited in Dei, Hall and Rosenberg, 2000, p. 23). She continues on saying that “Aboriginal knowledge is said to be personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in narrative or metaphorical language” (cited in Dei, Hall and Rosenberg, 2000, p. 25). Brant-Castellano (2000) shares a story in the chapter “ Updating Aboriginal Traditions of Knowledge” regarding Mathew Coon-Come, a northern Quebec Cree leader, and his experience of going back on the land with his father (originally appeared in Maclean’s, “Fighting for the Land” 108/9, 27 February, 1995, 16).

After spending years in residential schools and university, Mathew asked his father to teach him about the land of his ancestors. He arrived in the bush with a topographical map of the territory they were about to explore: ‘The first thing my Dad did was tear that map into tiny little pieces. He said I was committing the white man’s mistake, making plans for the land without ever setting foot on it, without ever getting a feel for it. (Brant-Castellano, cited in Dei, Hall and Rosenberg, 2000; p. 29)

For those Native searchers who have been educated in a western institution, acquiring and returning to our system of knowledge is challenging because it rejects everything we have been taught within colonial society. The knowledge that we experience on the land and in the natural environment is so different from the knowledge we obtain from within the institutions of the western academy (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009;
Wilson, 2008). For Indigenous people the land, the natural environment and the animals teach us the importance of relationship, humility, and respect – that we are a small part of something bigger. To know from within an Indigenous perspective is to touch, feel, smell, taste, see, and to live the experience. Indigenous knowledge “does not flow exclusively or primarily through our intellect” (Brant-Castellano, 2000, p. 29), it is multi-dimensional and engages all our senses which contributes to our knowing. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) quotes one of the interviewees who described the difference between a Western approach to knowledge and an Indigenous way of knowing:

The need to walk on the land in order to know it is a different approach to knowledge than the one-dimensional, literate approach to knowing. Persons schooled in a literate culture are accustomed to having all the context they need to understand a communication embedded in the text before them…. Persons taught to use all their senses—to absorb every clue to interpreting a complete, dynamic reality—may smile at the illusion that words alone, stripped of complementary sound and colour and texture, can convey meaning adequately. (RCAP, 1996, 1: p. 622-623)

Unfortunately, we have come to a place where we are moving away from our connection to the land, our cultural practices and our languages as our grandparents and their ancestors intuitively knew. Today’s Native person is consumed by the pace of society,
technology and the conveniences of a contemporary society—land and aspects of our culture have become a commodity in this modern day. Therefore, what are we passing on to our young people if we are not passing on the sacredness of our knowledge? Brant-Castellano (2000) acknowledges this concern and expresses that

young people no longer have daily access to experiential learning on the land; they have decreased levels of fluency in aboriginal languages that would keep them in communication with elders; and they spend much of their time in educational institutions that socialize them into dependence on the written word. There is a real danger that the elders who still retain traditional and spiritual knowledge, and who know the context in which empirical observations must be evaluated, will join their ancestors without passing on what they know. (Brant-Castellano, 2000, p. 32)

We as Native people are at a crucial point where the knowledge of our ancestors is slowly slipping away as our Elders pass on to the spirit world. Each and every time an Elder dies, a piece of our Indigenous epistemology and knowledge dies along with them. If we as a people want to restore the health and well-being of our families and communities it is vital that we as Native scholars and researchers undertake approaches which support and mobilize our ways of knowing (Martin-Hill, 2008, p. 63). As Capp and Jorgensen put it, traditional Indigenous knowledge
is generally transmitted orally and experientially, and not written. It is learned through hands-on experience and not taught in abstracted context. It is holistic, non-linear, and not reductionist in approach. It is qualitative and in the intuitive thinking mode, and not quantitative or in the analytical thinking mode. Instead of relying on explicit hypotheses, theories, and laws, it relies on spiritual, cumulative, and collective knowledge that is annually interpreted. Traditional Knowledge tries to understand systems as whole and not isolate the interacting parts.

(1977, p. 1)

An Indigenous qualitative research paradigm also incorporates a way of knowing or seeking knowledge by turning our gaze inwards to trust the inner exploration of answers (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Ermine writes, “Those who seek to understand the reality of existence and harmony with the environment by turning inward have a different incorporeal knowledge paradigm that might be termed ‘Aboriginal epistemology’… The inner space is that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being” (Ermine, 1995, p. 103). By trusting ourselves and our connection to the Creator on a spiritual level, we can experience a deeper source of knowledge and consciousness which allows us to become the people we desire to be based on our values and principles as Native people.

An Indigenous qualitative research paradigm also involves the researcher doing the necessary groundwork in preparation of carrying forward with their research (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This preparation is at times just as
important (or more so) as the methodology or the way in which the research is carried out. It is important to establishing and building relationships with the communities and people which you will be working with, understanding the history of the community and/or the group which you will be working with, as well as the issue/problem you will be studying (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). But it is also crucial to know that the history you may be reading may not be the history from that community’s perspective; crucial to understand and use cultural ethics and protocols; to be aware and open to cultural knowledge and epistemology; to ask questions and really listen to the answers; and to know that the research project that you are so nicely packaging may evolve into something that you did not expect.

**Research Questions**

This research is centered in understanding the resiliency and agency of Native youth and the impact a cultural journey has had on their identity and well-being as Haudenosaunee citizens. The research entails speaking with Native youth who participated with the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run(s) from 2005-2008, and also 2011, while travelling on foot through Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous territories (Ontario and Quebec, Canada; New York; Delaware; Virginia; North & South Carolinas; Tennessee; Kentucky; Illinois; Wisconsin; and Minnesota States). The journey served to share cultural knowledge of peace and unity, while seeking social justice and awareness of Indigenous issues. The overall research was guided by the following questions: 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? and 3) Are Unity Runs a form of cultural activism, and what impact does this type of activism have on Native youth?
At the ceremony we were helping out, there was a group of us young ones there helping…. It was decided that the Run or the Ride would be passed on through the ceremony [to the youth]. So from that point on my wheels started spinning, and I tried to think of how we were going to do it, what is it going to look like, and where are we going to go…

(Steph, SOY/youth, 2011)

When I decided to approach the youth with this idea for research, my wheels also started spinning. I knew Native people are at a time when reclaiming their cultural identity and sense of well-being is of the utmost importance for good health. I also knew the urgent need for effective helping approaches for Aboriginal people could not be underestimated. While the Canadian government has unsuccessfully attempted to address the needs of Aboriginal health and well-being as a fiduciary responsibility, the rates of disease, sicknesses and poor health (diabetes, obesity, heart disease, alcohol and drug addiction, depression) continue to grow within Aboriginal communities (Health Canada, 2003; MacMillan et al., 1996; Shewell, 2004). Therefore, I wanted this research study to employ an Indigenous approach which contained the cultural knowledge and practices encompassing an Indigenous epistemological understanding of health, well-being and social action.

When I originally designed this study, I had the expectation of participating and observing a thirty-two day spiritual journey of Native youth carrying out the final
ceremonial journey of the Unity Run. As much as I tried to organize and control my research project, I had to come to an understanding that I was not in control. Davies (1999) explains that [in] ethnographic research, fieldworkers have adopted various strategies to make themselves inconspicuous and hence reduce the dangers of reactivity. They rely on literally being an inconspicuous bystander; or they may take the opposite approach and reduce reactivity by participating as fully as possible, trying to become invisible in their role as researcher if not as human participant. (p. 7)

I had to ask myself, was this really what I wanted to do? Did I want to be inconspicuous, a bystander and invisible while conducting this research? An Indigenous research paradigm involves the searcher, as well as everyone on such a journey, being fully involved with every aspect of the daily routine. As Indigenous people we are not bystanders in the world that we live in. However, this was a hard lesson for me to learn. As I was preparing this wonderful field research project to study “the transformation of identity and well-being of Native youth while on the Unity Run,” I was placing myself as an inconspicuous invisible bystander on “their journey.”

My original proposal for this research project included photographing and video recording all parts of the journey, as well as video recording (Drew et al., 2010) the youth, adults/parents and Elders sharing their stories of their journey during talking circles (Lavallée, 2009; Struthers et al., 2003) or individual talks as we sat around a
campfire sharing our experiences, stories and laughter (Drew et al., 2010) reflecting on that day’s journey. I also wanted to record my views and experiences as an Onkwehonwe woman, re-searcher, and social worker as I experienced this journey, highlighting the importance of traditional cultural practices and knowledge while connecting to the land and natural environment as a restorative method in (re)discovering our identity and well-being as Native people.

In organizing the examination of this work, I have been observing and working with the SOY since 2005. This involvement has informed my thoughts and questions in seeking clarification in how cultural knowledge and experience resonate and transform the individual, particularly focusing on Native youth. Many families and communities have been affected by intergenerational trauma, residential schools and government policy which have created a gap in how the nurturing and knowledge of a culture is to carry forward. In addition, many Native youth and their families continue to have their attention pulled in many directions, due to societal development, the influence of peers, technology and a lack of interest in or awareness of Native culture. The experience I have had over the years with the Spirit of the Youth group allowed me to observe the varying levels of knowledge and awareness youth members attain through their experience. A few of the youth members possessed a level of understanding of the Haudenosaunee philosophy, knowledge and language due to their upbringing within the culture. Whereas for other SOY members, the Unity Runs were an opportunity to begin learning and experiencing who they were as Haudenosaunee. Sounded like a perfect research project to me!
When the Journey re-shapes the Methodology

The methodology which I had outlined in my research proposal did not transpire as I had planned and organized. The Spirit of the Youth group was expecting to have approximately twenty to forty people travel and participate on the 2011 Unity Run. Prior to commencing the 2011 Unity Run, I planned on informing all the participants of the research I would be conducting as we travelled, seeking both group and individual permissions prior to starting the research. Those individuals who agreed would sign the consent form (see appendix 4) prior to the commencement of the journey; as well, each participant was given the option to withdraw from the research without any consequences.

The evening before we were to leave for Tennessee to begin the 2011 Unity Run (May 20), I was informed by Yvonne (the youth leader) that we had only two vehicles traveling with the participants and it would be the youth leader’s vehicle and mine carrying all our gear. Yvonne said that she would be transporting one other participant, as well as the camping and cooking gear. I was informed that my vehicle would be transporting two young adults and their three-year old child. The next afternoon when I went to pick up the three people I was transporting, the brother of one of the participants decided that he was joining us on this journey. I hesitantly agreed. As I reflect back on this experience now, I believe this was my first lesson regarding the openness and flexibility I needed to learn and acquire as an Indigenous knowledge seeker.

The 2011 Spirit of the Youth Unity Run began with a total of seven participants: a three year old, a fifteen year old, a male in his mid-twenties, a female in her mid-
twenties, a female in her early-thirties, a woman in her mid-fifties, and me (a forty-nine year old female). From the seven participants about to embark on this journey, ethically I could only speak to four participants with their approval and signed consent form. Yet I had another lesson to learn. Prior to starting this research journey, I had outlined my role as a “researcher” (conducting interviews, holding talking circles, video recording, keeping field notes, etc.), which was different from my previous roles and duties (guide, navigator, networker and advisor, as well as shopping, cooking, looking for campsites, assisting in setting up camp, etc.) as I travelled with the Spirit of the Youth on their Unity Runs.

Before we began this journey, I explained to all seven participants that the Spirit of the Youth Unity group provided approval for me to document the Unity Run as part of my research project for my dissertation. Three of the four 2011 SOY Unity Run participants did not show any indication that they wanted to be included in this research. Therefore, I took this as an indication of not participating in the research. At the same time, I was informed by the group that my role as a support person and researcher would not exist and that I would become an actual participant/walker contributing to the overall kilometers this group would travel each day. Lesson number two: in collective Indigenous movements, there is no room for inconspicuous invisible bystanders on “their journey.” We all have to work, and contribute for the survival of the group and each other.

I decided within the first couple of days traveling with this group of youth that I would not explicitly include the experiences of the participants on this journey as a major part of my research study as I originally planned. I decided that I would attempt to keep
personal notes and reflect on my own experience as a full participant of this journey. However, knowing that this journey consisted of approximately 1500 kilometers or 950 miles over a thirty-day period with only six people walking and having to re-route the original planned journey due to the flooding of the Mississippi, I was unsure if I could maintain field notes or collect any data. Realizing I had to abandon my original research plan left me feeling uncertain, sad, insecure, and with a sense of failure. As I have learned on previous Unity journeys, when we are feeling such emotions we pray. That is what I did, as hard as it was for me. I prayed, and prayed, and prayed. Was I in the right place, doing the right research? Was I doing what I was supposed to be doing? How would I know? Those questions continued to resonate with me and on June 1, 2011 while I was on the SOY Unity Run, a coincidental sign presented itself to all who were participating. Below is an excerpt from my field notes and observations of the morning of June 1, 2011:

It was beautiful morning and we started off today as we did each day – with a smudge of sage/sweet grass and the Thanksgiving Address. As we proceeded down this road called Mill Springs Lane in the State of Illinois, we were confronted by some mean dogs which scared the crap out of us all!

After that incident we continued walking/running along Mill Springs Lane, as we approached the next crossroad we were surprised at what we saw. I could not believe my eyes – the street sign at this intersection
said “Freeman Rd.” Who would have guessed or planned this?! So, I took a picture of myself with this road sign and had a good laugh. We proceeded on until we approached the next intersection, which surprised me even more! OMG, I could not believe my eyes!! The street sign at this crossroad was “Bonnie Rd!” Who in the heck would have believed this? It was not planned on our part and it was not part of our route. What a coincidence!! Who would of guess that we would come across these two roads – that spelled out my name! I took a picture of this road as well. I could not believe this!! We checked the back road maps which did not have these roads labeled with these two names—Freeman or Bonnie. We – I had no idea, it was crazy!! “The power of spirituality,” one SOY member said. Another SOY member said; “Well, we know that you are supposed to be on this journey”!

(Freeman’s field notes, SOY 2011)

This experience reminded me of Kathy Absolon (2011) and how she explains that Indigenous methodologies are “wholistic and all encompassing…. The Indigeneity of our re-search is held within our own Spirit as our search for knowledge is regarded as a sacred process” (p. 118). The Unity Rides and Runs are a sacred and spiritual space and process in discovering ourselves as we pray and sacrifice for the health of our families and communities. This is done by connecting through our body, heart, minds and spirit with the land, our culture and the collectivity of the people. Absolon (2011) articulates that Indigenous research methodologies also possess a similar connection to the body,
heart, mind and spirit. Whether I was conscious of it or not, my journey and search for knowledge always began with me. The SOY Unity Runs have been a conduit which brings the body, mind, heart and spirit together for healing—to help us move past the pain and hurt we carry and discover and grow to who we truly are. We do this by bringing our minds together for the purpose and good of our people—to pray for peace, unity and healing. We humbly sacrifice the physicality of our bodies by running/walking, which (re)connects us spiritually, emotionally and consciously to the land, the natural environment and to each other. This journey provides a doorway to discover and reaffirm who we are as Onkwehonwe. The lesson that I am learning is that Indigenous research and “methodologies create doorways to self-discovery and other unanticipated journeys. Indigenous searchers found doorways that revealed possibilities of healing, knowledge, history, truth, identity, culture and much more” (Absolon, 2011, p. 138). While the 2011 SOY Unity Run is a ceremony, research is also a ceremony (Wilson, 2008): “We gain knowledge and power from the universe around us in various ways…. knowledge can come to you from above, from a flash of inspiration, or… from putting form to a bundle of relationships that were previously invisible…. We need all of the methods available to us that allow us to fulfill our obligations or relationships to the community” (Wilson, 2008, p. 111). The lesson I have gained is that as an Indigenous searcher, I may not immediately see or learn the lesson that I am to acquire from my experience. Yet the potential to understand and learn from that experience is always present and revealing, even many years afterward.

After I returned home from the 2011 Unity Run, I revisited my research proposal and ethics application, and determined that I had proposed to speak with SOY members
and supportive adults who had participated on previous Spirit of the Unity Runs from 2005 to 2008. I consulted with my supervisors informing them of the circumstances surrounding the lack of consent from participants and the lack of data collection while on the 2011 Unity Run. I then expressed that I would focus my research in speaking with SOY participants from previous Unity Runs, and that I had included this within my original ethics application to Wilfrid Laurier and to Six Nations. My supervisors consented to the refocus of my research and assured me that I was still with the parameters of my ethics application.

**Reconnecting to the Spirit of the Youth**

The central part of this study is comprised of the historical conversations with nineteen young adults and adults who participated in the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. In addition, two adults from the 2011 Unity Run agreed to a meet with me to share their experiences. Fourteen of these individuals were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-eight (16-28) when they first participated in the Unity Runs. Five of the nineteen participants were adults and/or parents who supported their children and other young people on this journey. The adults provided the youth with support (i.e. driving, listening, cooking, shopping, providing assistance with camp, etc.), and were a cultural resource in sharing the stories, history and knowledge of the Haudenosaunee while on the journey. In addition to these interviews, I also include my observations as a participant and walker during the 2011 SOY Unity Run.
Over the four-year period in which the Spirit of the Youth held the Unity Runs, the group expanded from twenty members to approximately seventy-five members who were committed to participating in this journey. The membership grew as a result of the SOY group running and visiting over thirteen Haudenosaunee communities as part of their journey. At times, up to three hundred youth participated as the group approached and entered a larger Onkwehonwe community. As a result, I contacted approximately thirty youth and ten adults to discuss their experiences with me.

The Spirit of the Youth participants who responded to my request include fourteen youth (3 male and 11 female) who were involved at various times (2005-2008) with the SOY Unity Runs. I also had five parents/adult supporters (1 male and 4 female) who travelled with the SOY group while on the Unity Runs offering support and guidance to the youth during the five-year journey agree to speak with me.

Ten of the nineteen participants (7 youth and 3 adults) travelled on other Unity Rides and Runs, particularly the 2004 Okanogan Unity Ride & Run from Sioux Valley, Manitoba to Six Nations, Ontario. One adult also indicated that they participated in the 1996 Lakota Unity Ride and Run from Wahpeton, Saskatchewan (near Prince Albert) to Grey Horn Butte, Wyoming.

The majority of the participants in this study are from Six Nations of the Grand River which has one of the largest populations of band members among Indian Reserves in Canada (approximately 22,000 to 24,000 members). There are a few of the research participants who are from other Haudenosaunee communities, and are indirectly connected to the Six Nations community. Despite such a large population, our Haudenosaunee communities possess a very close network of extended family, friends
and acquaintances. Therefore, it is important that an individual’s identity remain anonymous and confidential if specified on the consent form. When reviewing the consent forms to determine which participants indicated whether they “Agreed” or “Disagreed” in using their name and identity with this study, eleven (11) participants “Agreed” to have their name used within the study. One (1) participant indicated that they “Disagreed” to have their name used, and eight (8) choose not to mark either “Agree” or “Disagree” on their consent form. Therefore, the eight (8) participants who choose not to mark whether they “Agree” or “Disagree” were assigned a pseudonym with this research.

In composing the chart below, I have highlighted certain individuals with an asterisk * in the column after their name; these are participants who requested that their real name not be used or did not indicate whether or not they wanted their name shared. For those individuals, I have replaced their real name with a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. I also replaced their identifying nation with the broader reference, Haudenosaunee. In regards to the number of years in which these youth and adults participated on the Unity Runs, I replaced the specific year(s) with a broader reference which coincides with the first year (2005) the Spirit of the Youth group began their journeys, with the ending year represented with question marks. This helps keep their identity unrevealed.

The two young women who were also the leaders for the SOY Unity Runs indicated they wanted to remain anonymous. Therefore I assigned each woman a pseudonym. Yet, I also wanted each young woman to maintain their anonymity when discussing the “leadership” of the Spirit of the Youth group. For that reason, I decided
that I would assign an additional pseudonym “Yvonne” to represent the consensual leadership and the one voice the two women had in leading, guiding, organizing and carrying out the SOY Unity Runs. Hence, those readers or community people who may read this document in the future and know both women may not be able to recognize their identity by their single interview pseudonym. In addition, their identity would not be identifiable by the quotations used in discussing the business of the Spirit of the Youth.

By using the pseudonym “Yvonne,” each SOY leader maintains their individual thoughts and opinions, and more importantly their identity remains anonymous within this study.

In the table below, is a list of the demographics of the youth and adults within this study. The table includes their name or a pseudonym, gender, nation, the years they participated in the SOY Unity Runs, the years they participated in other Unity Runs and their role.
**Spirit of the Youth Participants – Youth Members and Adult Supporters**

**Table 1: Youth members**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>SOY Unity Run Participation Year</th>
<th>Previous Unity Rides &amp; Run Year</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gusenneeyoh</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Cayuga</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2005-2007</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsiehente</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2005-2007</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watenonsiostha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Tuscarora</td>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakota</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelly</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steph</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brook</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sammy</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>2 Females</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Youth Leaders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes that a pseudonym has replaced their true name in both charts.

**Table 2: Adult/Support People**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>SOY Unity Run Participation Year</th>
<th>Previous Unity Rides &amp; Run Year</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garnette</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Cayuga</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant &amp; Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haudenosaunee</td>
<td>2005-??</td>
<td>Participant &amp; Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2005-2007</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Participant &amp; Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visiting with the Youth: Gathering Stories of their Journey

I initially invited the SOY members that I personally knew from the first four years of the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs by speaking with them in person if we happened to meet in the community or at a community event. I contacted people by telephone, email or a personal message through the social media Facebook with a copy of my recruitment letter (see appendix 3). I also asked the two Unity Run Youth Leaders to inform the Spirit of the Youth members of my study and for them to contact me (email or telephone) if they were interested in speaking with me about their experience.

My first attempt to organize interviews, I arranged a meeting with two past participants who invited me to dinner at their home. I decided to bring a strawberry short cake for dessert. When I arrived at the house, I was invited in and the three of us began to engage in the Native protocol of “visiting.” Visiting is an important custom among the Haudenosaunee and consists of re-kindling our relationships with each other through relaxed and casual conversation. It is believed that this practice started long before settlers arrived to this continent. During this period we talked about how we were, what we were currently doing (job, schools, and social activities) and how our families were doing. When one is conducting “business” in a community or with individuals, it is important to take the time to “visit” by sharing stories, updating each other on our lives and families, and laughing. It is also important to include refreshments or meals while “visiting.” By providing nourishment, food and conversation allows everyone to share in the replenishing of body, mind and spirit, as well as of relationships.
After dinner during our strawberry short cake, the participants shifted the “visiting” to the “business” or the purpose of my visit. I informed the two participants of my study and gave each person an information letter (see appendix 3), a copy of the questions (see appendix 5), and ensured that each individual signed a consent form (see appendix 4). After the formalities of the research were attended to, I began the conversation by asking if I could record the interview and then proceeded with the questions. Each question I asked evoked memories, stories, emotions and laughter regarding their experiences while on the Unity Run. The reminiscing lasted approximately one and a half hours. At the end of our meeting, I provided each individual with a debriefing letter explaining the purpose of the interview (see appendix 7), as well as a tobacco tie, a thank you note (see appendix 6) and an honorarium gift of twenty-five dollars.

Over the next four weeks after my initial conversation with the first two participants, I received no replies to or interest in my request for an interview meeting. I decided that I would openly tell potential participants that I was offering an honorarium gift of twenty-five dollars for their involvement in a conversation about their experience with the SOY Unity Runs. In a period of six weeks, I was able to arrange seventeen interviews with past SOY members. The meetings were casual “kitchen table” conversations which took place at my house, at the individual’s house, in another Haudenosaunee community, at a protest site, at a community event, or (in one case) at a restaurant in the United States. I allowed the individual to decide where they would feel comfortable in speaking with me. We then would proceed to “visiting” for approximately fifteen to twenty minutes, laughing, sharing and enjoying refreshments.
The conversation would shift to the “business” at a point that depended on the time and comfort of the participant. In most cases it was the participant who shifted the conversation, though in a few instances I asked if the participant was ready to share their experience. As I discussed the purpose of my study, I provided each individual with a copy of the information letter and a copy of the questions. I would read the consent form and stated clearly to the participant that they could withdraw from the research at any time with no consequences, and had them sign the consent. I then would proceed with the conversation by asking my research questions and audio-taping the interview (with approval). In one case, one of the participants requested that they take the interview questions home and send back their response through email, to which I agreed. When the interviews were completed, I checked in with each participant to ensure they were emotionally alright, and asked if they had any additional questions or concerns regarding this research conversation or the study. None of the interviewees had concerns and all indicated they were emotionally fine after the interview. As a precaution, I provided each participant with a debriefing letter. I individually thanked each person while handing them a tobacco tie, along with a Thank You card with the gift of twenty-five dollars enclosed.

After I completed the interviews, I hired a semi-professional transcriptionist to assist in transcribing the interviews. The transcriptionist signed a confidentiality form for working with my research. This transcriptionist received nine of the eighteen interviews. I transcribed the remaining nine interviews myself. The responses of the participant who decided to return their response by email did not need transcribing. Once all the interviews were transcribed, I reviewed them and removed any identifying and
confidential material from the interviews. I also reviewed the written transcriptions while listening to the audio recordings a number of times, drawing out themes and topics and issues which were similar or which I may have missed.

**Making Meaning of the Journey and the Stories from the Youth – Data Analysis**

In Native oral tradition history and storytelling, the storyteller often leaves the story that they are telling open for the listener to interpret based on their understanding and take what lessons as may seem appropriate to their life experiences (Archibald, 2008; Hulan & Eigenbrod, 2008). In the context of these research findings, I offer the reader the narratives and experiences from those who participated in a journey to interpret or relate to the reader’s own stories and experiences. Joanne Archibald (2008) highlights a quote by Elders Wapaskwean and Walter Lightning regarding the layers of tenets and metaphors within stories that wait for the listener to unravel: “When a hearer has that story, and knows the narrative sequence of it, there is another story contained within that story…. A hearer isn’t meant to understand the story at all levels, immediately. It is as if it unfolds” (Wapaskwean and Lightening, quoted by Archibald, 2008, p. 84). As I listen to and take the time to ponder over what I have heard from the youth and adults regarding their insights into their experiences, I feel it is important to integrate those narratives, stories and experiences with supportive Indigenous knowledge from Haudenosaunee scholars and cultural carriers. I believe when we go back to read and reread these experiences and relate them back to our own lives, it is an opportunity for us to relate to our own lives the insights, metaphors and tenets revealed.
“Making meaning” or understanding the information which we have acquired through research is an ongoing process in the course of Indigenous methodology. This process embodies the notion of Indigenous wholism by analyzing the information that has been gathered through the body, mind, heart and spirit (Absolon, 2011). This ensures that the voices, experiences and stories of the youth are captured and central to this study.

As I needed clarification or deeper understanding from the stories I heard, I would seek out knowledgeable community members to discuss cultural knowledge, philosophy and/or protocols without disclosing the identity of participants. It was my hope that the information I sought would be in the form of stories, teachings or words within the Haudenosaunee language which were relevant to my research and work. During these informal conversations, I ask these individuals their thoughts on particular areas of my research. Many times these discussions strayed away from the information I was seeking, and in other times I would get a response such as “Oh, that’s the Great Law” or “that’s what the Peacemaker did.” These particular discussions provided me with understanding as I thought about the stories and information provided by the youth. None of the conversations with the community members were audio-taped or recorded. Yet I would always seek permission from the community member if I could use the information in guiding my search, decisions and writing. In all cases, the community member(s) that I consulted with agreed. I may not quote these community members directly, but they have influenced me and provided me with direction with their cultural knowledge.

Making meaning draws on a wholistic view of the stories and conversations shared by the youth and the adults who participated in this study. Therefore, I divided
this study into five themes relating to the research questions I explored, which are: 1) Culture-based activism; 2) the motivation and intent of participation; 3) the journey; 4) identity; and 5) well-being. The responses and conversations I had with the participants were detailed and rich. I also wanted to gain a deeper cultural understanding of what the participants were speaking to. Therefore, I have sectioned the five areas of the findings into two chapters. Chapter 4: The Findings, Part 1 - Native Youth & Culture-based Activism, will examine the youths’ perspectives on their actions towards social justice and their motivation for these actions. Chapter 5: The Findings, Part 2 - The Journey, explores Haudenosaunee epistemology regarding the Unity Run and the impact/transformation this has had on the youths’ view of their cultural identity and well-being.

The interpretation and perspectives of the youth and adults in this study provides a secondary level of themes under each main theme. Each area (main themes and secondary themes) is examined by relating Haudenosaunee knowledge and epistemology through the principles within the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen—Thanksgiving Address, the Great Law of Peace (Peace; Good-mindedness and Righteousness) and Haudenosaunee cultural knowledge, thus relating back to what the youth and adults have reminisced about their journey and participation with the SOY Unity Runs (2005-2008; 2011).
Chapter 4: The Findings, Part 1 – Native Youth & Culture-based Activism

The presentation of the research findings under the thematic area of culture-based activism begins by exploring August 27, 2004 when the Okanagan Unity Ride completed its four-year journey by opening the International Elders Summit in the Haudenosaunee community of the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Ontario, Canada. This Unity Ride brought the spirit of Indigenous healing and unity and a vision of action and change for the Haudenosaunee people.

The International Elders Summit which met until September 1, 2004, consisted of Elders, spiritual leaders, community people and youth from across North America, South America and other parts of the world. The Summit provided a space for Indigenous peoples to discuss Indigenous prophecies, as well as issues such as the future of the earth, the natural environment, inherent rights, and the treatment of Indigenous peoples. The gathering also offered ways of addressing the overwhelming social, political, economic and health problems suffered in many Indigenous communities (Martin-Hill et al, 2008). These discussions and presentations resulted in the Elders drawing up a declaration, a “call to action” which acknowledged and addressed the cultural, environmental and human rights of the Indigenous people represented at this Summit (Martin-Hill et al., 2008).

The youth who participated in this Summit held meetings and dialogued about the dire conditions they have witnessed and experienced in their own communities. They listened to the speeches, stories and presentations by Elders, spiritual leaders and community members which inspired them to support the “call to action” by the Elders (Martin-Hill et al., 2008) and write a Youth Declaration. “The Indigenous Elders
Declaration” and “The Indigenous Youth Declaration” (please see appendix) express the collective statements articulating “fundamental ideas on the environment, ending violence against Indigenous women, and advancing human rights of Indigenous peoples” (Martin-Hill et al, 2008, p. 57). At the conclusion of the International Elders Summit, the Elders held ceremony and asked the Six Nations Haudenosaunee Youth if they would undertake the four-year journey known as the Unity Run to bring together Indigenous communities under the terms of peace and unity, while sharing the Elders and Youth Declarations. The Elders also asked the youth if they would carry and present these collective statements to the United Nations—they agreed.

Shortly after the International Elders Summit, the Spirit of the Youth Working Group was formed and began planning for their first Unity Run which would commence the summer of 2005. The youth group decided that their first year of the SOY Unity Run would journey from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory to the Central Fire of the Haudenosaunee People, the Onondaga Nation near Syracuse, New York, to share the two declarations (Elders and Youth) with the Chiefs and Clan Mothers. These declarations were considered a living document by the Spirit of the Youth group and were the purpose and focus of the SOY Unity Run. One of the youth explains what this document meant to the youth:

We did carry it with us the whole time. It helped us keep our focus and it helped people to realize what we were doing and what we are about, it was our united voice. There were so many youth represented at the Summit... it came from us. It wasn’t written up by a bunch of who-
evers who thought that was what we wanted to say. It was us, we wrote it, and that’s what we wanted to say. It was real and it was what we the youth… felt in our hearts. That’s what we wanted to be able to get out in each of our territories, and also on a world level. It was like carrying an idea or a thought... from that gathering that was captured... and [we] kept it moving. (Steph, youth participant, 2011)

The adults and parents who travelled with the Spirit of the Youth group conveyed the pride and determination this group of youth possessed while representing their people throughout their territory and at the United Nations. They were “so fearless, so driven in presenting their ideas” to world leaders. A man in the audience stood up after the youth presented their Youth Declaration and commended the youth for their passion and drive, he said:

I was here 20 years ago and saw the first youth from Onondaga, and they were silent and quiet. Now we have this new group who has found their voice, projecting it onto an organization that was willing to listen. WOW, what a powerful moment for the history of our people. (Josie, adult participant, 2011)

While not all youth were a part of the SOY Unity Run from the beginning, Dakota and Jesse were two young women who participated in the 2004 Unity Ride which opened the Elders Summit. One of the young women explained why they did not participate with the youth group in creating the Youth Declaration.
I think the Unity Riders coming off the ride in 2004, and then going to the Elder’s Summit… we were in a different mindset to the people that were already at Grand River. We were just riders that were getting there. It was awesome to be welcomed by the community, but when it came to the initial work and sitting down and writing mission statements on behalf of the youth in creating the declaration, none of us wanted to sit down and do that. We were on the road and for some of us up to three months. We didn’t want to sit down and read papers, we just wanted to go swimming, and just be together. So it was hard to buckle down to one thing. A lot of stuff that was written about the Youth Declaration was written by people who weren’t part of the Unity Ride. It was more or less people who came to the Summit and were at home taking care of our needs who were on the ride. So when the Declaration was created by the youth at the Elder’s Summit, it was agreed on by those people that we were going to take on the Unity Ride for four years within our own territory. (Dakota, youth participant, 2011)

For the first three summers of the SOY Unity Run (2005 to 2007), the youth shared the Youth and Elders Declaration with many of the communities within Haudenosaunee territory that they journeyed through. In 2007 the Spirit of the Youth left the Mohawk Community of Akwesasne, Cornwell, ON and travelled south towards New York City. One of the youth leaders shared that there were approximately seventy-five
runners, support people and Elders that travelled with the Spirit of the Youth and that this was the most people they had on the Unity Run at one time (Brook, 2011). The youth had always run during the day, but knowing that they were going into the largest and busiest city on their journey, New York City, the group decided that a small group of runners with one vehicle would travel through the city at night. It was also decided that the rest of the group would meet up with the runners at approximately 4:30 a.m. to 5 a.m. the next morning of August 9, 2007 to arrive at the United Nations at the break of dawn. Josie, one of the parents and support people of the SOY Unity Run, shares her memories of the morning the youth arrived at the United Nations in New York City:

that is a real sacred time of the morning, those kids suited up. It was almost like suiting up our warriors back in the old days. We were getting ready to run through the streets of New York City to go to the United Nations. It’s the city that never sleeps, but the city was quiet that morning. When our young men and women were running through the streets of New York into Manhattan, they were giving the war cry. People stopped and stood in their tracks, and watched and were amazed when they realized what they were witnessing. That was our original homeland, territories of our ancestors and here we were running and... there was a spiritual army behind us. It was chilling. I cried and I cried to see those kids gather on the street…. It was such a moment when the sun rose, such a powerful moment of a peace. A return to something that we have been denied. It was just so empowering and so capsulated
in a moment. That all those years of abuse by colonizers... and we are still here. We’re still resisting and now it’s the children who are doing it. It’s just amazing. (Josie, adult participant, 2011)

For some people “getting to the U.N. was almost anticlimactic. [Yet] we made it and it was a beautiful experience, a beautiful day. We made it exactly at daybreak” (Phoebe, adult participant, 2011). The youths and adults celebrated their arrival, making it this far. As a way to celebrate, the youth broke out in traditional song and dance on the sidewalk in front of the United Nations. While the group were singing and dancing, the New York City Police arrived and were attempting to remove the group from the premises. Phoebe, one of the adults on the Unity Run went to talk with the Police as she did in many towns and cities, explaining to the officers what the youth were doing and why: “At first, they weren’t going to allow it to happen... but, their minds were changed as they stood and watched. They were like; ‘WOW these people have been running for 20 years carrying these staffs to get here?’  It defied their understanding... and instead of kicking us off the street, they were enjoying the experience with us” (Phoebe, adult participant, 2011).

Dakota shared her views regarding the Spirit of the Youth at the United Nations; she recognized that the youth worked hard to get to the U.N., and that the United Nations recognized the work that they did with the declaration as well as their journey to get there. However, for Dakota “what was happening at the United Nations is not activism”:

They had established the forum to be permanent for the rights of the Indigenous peoples, so that was a success for us. As long as those

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countries that are representing the United Nations are going to keep to their word, it’s in their hands. The hard part of the United Nations is that we aren’t represented, other than this Permanent Forum on the Indigenous peoples. (Dakota, youth participant, 2011)

Dakota and others made an interesting point and expressed that in the meetings with Chiefs and Clan Mothers. Since the formation of the United Nations, Haudenosaunee leaders such as Cayuga Chief Levi General, also known as Deskaheh, advocated for the Haudenosaunee nations to be represented as nations of people under this organizational structure. Doing so would support the inherent rights and nation to nation agreements/treaties for all Indigenous people in North America (Sotsisowah/Akwesasne Notes, 1981).

Phoebe agreed with Dakota, and they both expressed that “a lot of people felt it was pinnacle and the reason behind the things they were doing.” However for Phoebe and others, the United Nations was another memorable moment of this journey that went along with many other moments, such as:

running in the rain, kids singing in the car... sitting and talking to the people that we met were things I found amazing, and the impacts that we made weren’t these kind of political actions that people are so proud of. Yeah that’s a... feat for sure, but it was just one of many, many, many, many feats. (Phoebe, adult participant, 2011)

Phoebe highlights an important point in that the Unity Run was not so much about obtaining the goals of meeting with the Chiefs and Clan Mothers at the Central Fire of the
Haudenosaunee or presenting the Youth and Elders Declarations at the United Nations. While those moments of the journey were important, the everyday experiences and challenges while on the Unity Run were just as important. These daily situations the youth experienced on the Unity Run were opportunities in applying the lessons, skills and cultural knowledge they had learned while on this journey.

The youth were learning how to transform and carry forward cultural knowledge, values, and principles into their daily lives after the Unity Run. Nonetheless, Dakota (2011), Shelly (2011) and others expressed that what they have learned on the Unity Run is quite different from what some of our own Onkwehonwe people refer to as activism. The youth explained that our own Native people have become accustomed to the reactive state in which we are living and we are not meant to live that way. Dakota (2011) explains what she means by her statement:

The way we are right now at Six Nations is that we’re in a reactive state. Every time something bad happens, we have to react it. We’re not having the opportunity to build the steps to be at a place where we don’t have to react to things like another death in the community. I have this way of putting it: In the Longhouse we don’t wait for somebody to die to learn how to perform a funeral. Our people practice it and we practice the speeches, and we have practices before ceremonies so that when the ceremony comes we don’t have to be in the state of wondering what to do. The same thing with funerals, we prepare for when somebody dies so that we don’t have to react to what
has happened, we’re already prepared for it. That’s the way we were as people to begin with, for a millennium. When we had a bad crop one year, it was okay because we would keep as many as seven years worth of food in storage. We’re not like that anymore. We don’t have enough food in houses for more than a week. An activist movement is very much like that, we’re constantly on edge because of it. (Dakota, youth participant, 2011)

Jesse, Dakota, Shell, Nathan, Sammy and Watenonsiiosthha referred to “Kanonhstaton” also known as the Six Nations Douglas Creek Reclamation (2005 to present), as well as other examples from their own communities of the reactive state which Native people have undertaken as a form of activism. Phoebe describes activism as a huge gathering of people who are standing up and saying “We are not going take it anymore!” She continued on saying:

There’s always those people that stand up and become the face of activism. “I’m doing this and I am making a stand, and look at me, and here I am, and you better listen to me.” Then there’s the 500 people behind him that are actually just doing the work: people need to eat, people need to have a place to shower and be clean, people need to come to an understanding, so they share. So to me, activism is just trying to make things better, nicer or trying to be hospitable or sharing what you know. Or just saying; “you’re right, I’ll support you.” There are all kinds of actual ways to be an activist. Some aren’t the sexy,
strong, political picture, but it’s the same action. (Phoebe, adult participant, 2011)

Jesse and the other participants expressed that the foundation of their views and standpoints relating to the various actions of Native activism is premised on Haudenosaunee knowledge and the Great Law. Nonetheless, these views and standpoints relating to “Native activism” can sometimes be taken out of context and perceived as violent, which is opposite to what the Great Law stands for—peace. The youth also expressed that the language and discourse used by media and others distort and misconstrue the underlying purpose for the actions taken by Native groups in seeking justice. “It’s hard to say they’re ‘fighting’ for something” when the term “fighting” can produce false or distorted image of violence in the public eye. “We say ‘fighting for it’ even though it could be a peaceful protest” (Jesse, youth participant, 2011). Therefore, the public gets caught up in the “propaganda of activism” by the media and those in opposition (Dakota, 2011; Phoebe, 2011). For instance, the media gravitated to the violent image of a group of young Onkwehonwe men, and this image of the violent Indians/Natives was etched into the minds of the general public because they look Indian, had their faces covered, and were positioned with a warrior flag and a bonfire burning in the background (Dakota, 2011; Phoebe, 2011). Unfortunately, images and news stories such as these distract from the long and arduous path to justice which Native people are seeking in claiming our inherent rights, land claims, and treaty rights as a people. On the other hand, activism and Native culture can be used as a source of strength in guiding and
supporting individuals and groups in healing and seeking social justice. Dakota (2011) shares her view regarding these two points:

Native culture and activism… come mixed to the point where we are disciplining ourselves without culture. If doing an opening address… in the morning is going to make myself rejuvenated enough to get through the day is activism, then that’s important. But if I am doing it for the media attention, then there’s no spirit to it. It grabs the attention of the Canadian public and they see Indians and get a different interpretation. They’re not there seeing us do ceremony. They’re not seeing us live life like Onkwehonwe people. They only see these [Native Guys] on the front cover and a huge bonfire behind [them]. So, I think it is good and bad. (Dakota, youth participant, 2011)

Dakota highlights an important point with regards to Native activism and that is the “spirit” within and behind the action. It was interesting, that all the youth and adult participants discussed the aspect of “spirit” and spirituality as a cultural connection with Native activism. Emma shares her point of view regarding the notion of spirituality, culture and activism:

Activism for the Onkwehonwe people has a lot to do with your spirituality. It’s who you are. It’s like standing up for what you believe in, but when it is your spirituality you’re already doing that so there’s
no way to sway. The best way to show that is when “Kanonhstaton” happened and the whole land issue. There was not a thought in anybody’s mind, “oh we’re not defending land that’s not ours.” It was their spirituality. Within a day there were ten thousand people on that site. Knowing that your spirituality pulled you so strong to stand there and fight. That’s what activism is, it comes from your spiritually and it is who you are and nothing can tell you that you’re in the wrong. As much as he says we have an injunction and you have to leave. You are like, “oh yah, tell that to my spirit.” They can’t ‘cause they are talking to a physical body, it has a lot to do with your spiritual body and who you are. Activism to me does not exist. (Emma, youth participant, 2011)

While there is a direct connection between spirituality and culture among Native people which guides and influences our actions, Emma as well as others expressed that spirituality is who we are and spirit is what guides us. Gusenneeyoh explains that “If you’re spiritual, your beliefs are tied to how you see the world, what you think and your life. So, if someone thinks Gaiwiio (Code of Handsome Lake) is important and that’s how they should live their life, then they’re not drinking or using any of those mind changers.” Jon also agrees with the others 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 Peace Maker and the Great Law of Peace which directs us and our actions in a “good mind.”

The “good mind” and “spirituality” are foundational concepts within Haudenosaunee culture and activism (Emma, youth participant, 2011). 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.

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, 2011)

In all the discussions with the participants, they explained that Native “activism” is a hands-on approach. However, Dakota (2011) 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, 2011)

Dakota’s response reminds me of the famous quote by Mahatma Ghandi: “You must be the change you want to see in the world.” The underlying purpose of our actions is not self-serving, but to ensure that future generations are able to survive and live as Onkwehonwe people. Phoebe explains that if we want to be an activist, we could “rebel...
against the colonizer, by learning our language, live off the land and know your culture.”

Mindy agrees with Phoebe and expresses that learning your language and your culture is like “being a part of a protest…it’s learning your rights and responsibilities as an Onkwehonwe person.”

Other youth have shared that our responsibilities regarding activism entail “understanding our own history” and “taking a stand to ‘right’ that history” (Shelly, youth participant 2011). It’s about putting aside your personal issues for the best of the community and our people (Mindy, youth participant, 2011). 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 (Alice, adult participant, 2011).

Yet activism 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, 2011)
In contrast, Dakota thought the Unity Run was a form of activism in striving for social change and justice. This 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. According to Emma, “It’s a form of activism in the essence of spirituality.... The Unity Run was a path and you had to go into yourself to find that path that was right for you” (Emma, youth participant, 2011). Dakota shared her perspective of the Unity Run as a form of activism:

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, 2011)

Jon shares Dakota’s perspective of activism and states that the Unity Run “was like a form of activism because it brought different points of view, awareness and the message of unity. Everybody was like a family... there were arguments obviously, but that’s what
a family does. It was about coming together and learning from each other and caring about one another” (Jon, youth participant, 2011). 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” (Steph, youth participant, 2011). It was a revitalizing way back to our culture and way of being on the land (Gusenneeyoh, youth participant, 2011).

Another thing that all the participants indicated was that the Unity Run was youth driven and brought together and mended communities. It connected many young people from various places. Mandy shared that prior to the Unity Run many Native youth were not interacting between communities or attending cultural events such as the “Sings,”8, and didn’t have the money to travel. Because of the Unity Run, those who participated now have friends all over the territory. This youth-driven and youth-led cultural initiative left a lasting impression on the adults as well: “We know as adults that young people can do this; we did it and anybody could do it with encouragement for other young people” (Mandy, youth participant, 2011).

Nathan shares that he does believe that the Unity Run is “a form of activism; it sure isn’t protesting. What we are doing is 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” (Nathan, youth participant, 2011). It was also an opportunity

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8 The Sing is a twice yearly meeting of the benevolent Haudenosaunee “Singing Society” consisting of groups of men and groups of women (young and old) who meet to share and report the help (cooking for funerals, aiding families that have undergone tragedy, singing at the retirement home, etc) that each group has done since the last time we met.
for the youth to show older people that they cared and were worried about the language, ceremonies and our cultural knowledge (Sammy, youth participant, 2011):

The Unity Run showcased that we trust our youth enough to carry a message from one point of our nation to the next. To allow the message to be carried by youth and not by public officials showed that we entrusted our future to our future generations and that it is their role to stand up and to be the ones.... If you start that at a young age, then you get a community that thrives. (Shelly, youth participant, 2011)

Phoebe explains that she doesn’t think the youth consciously went out to make a statement, “But without a doubt these Runs did influence and make a very positive statement in most cases.... It was almost like a truer or more pure form of activism, because it wasn’t about being seen, it wasn’t an ego trip. It was this thing that occurred during the course of the activities” (Phoebe, adult participant, 2011).

Josie agrees with all the participants in saying the Unity Run was an “absolute symbol of activism,” which involved our youth and Elders telling “the world that we are still here, that we’re not going anywhere and that we are going to continue to do acts of resistance to remind you that there’s a culture and there’s a people, not a population. A people founded in a higher consciousness and connection to the land that we share” (Josie, adult participant, 2011). When Phoebe speaks about that “truer or more pure form of activism,” Josie shares these two stories of what she defines as a “perfect picture of activism.” The first story she speaks of is when the Spirit of the Youth marched across the Niagara Falls International Rainbow Bridge from Canada to the United States.
(Niagara Falls, New York). Josie explains that approximately thirty youth and Elders dressed in their traditional regalia, possessed a confidence as they asserted their rights as Haudenosaunee people in accordance to the Jay Treaty\(^9\) when they crossed the International border into the United States.

I remember one of the young men 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.

It seemed that this group of youth could not be stopped by U.S. Customs Officers. However when they did reach the Customs Officers the youth and Elders shared with the officers the purpose of their Unity Run journey. While some officers were speaking with the youth and Elders, support people such as myself provided the Customs Supervisor with a list of members within our group along with their Band Indian Status Identification cards. The Customs

\(^9\) The Haudenosaunee and the Algonquin Nations have an inherent right to cross freely between the United States and Canada. This right is protected under the Jay Treaty of 1794 (Jill St. Germain, 2001; James S. Frideres, 1993; Menno Bolt, 1993).
Officers and Supervisor briefly reviewed the list and then released the group to continue on with their journey. The second story Josie refers to is when the youth ran through the County of Cayuga in New York State, which is also the traditional homeland and territory of the Cayuga people. Josie explains the high level of fear and anxiety the youth experienced due to the signs\textsuperscript{10} which were displayed on some people’s lawns. She continues on sharing how the youth relied on their spirituality to provide them strength as they learned of the history and views of a few citizens within this county.

Josie shares these thoughts:

…running through those \textit{racist counties}, it is very rare in your life that you achieve such a heightened spiritual plane and in my life that was

\textsuperscript{10} Upstate Citizens for Equality challenges the land claims and rights of the Haudenosaunee Nations saying that the Haudenosaunee people were made citizens under the Indian Citizenship Act and claims that no one is above the law under the “Rule of Law”: http://www.upstate-citizens.org/

Picture provided by SOY participants Gusenneeyoh and Garnette, taken November 23, 2014
clearly one of them. We were tired, we were hungry, we were thirsty and that day when we ran in 110 degree heat and our runners were collapsing and it was really hard to get through the day, but we survived. We made it. Then to find out that [200] years before, to the day our ancestors were going through a Holocaust. It was acknowledged through the medicine of time, that those ancestors found healing in what we did. We were touched by that, it was amazing.

(Josie, adult participant, 2011)

The youth and adult participants of this research have expressed valid points pertaining to the Unity Run as something more than a social movement of Native young people. It encompassed a spirituality of action/activism from an Onkwehonwe consciousness. The participants in this research all spoke to how “activism is the act of doing something” which involves the spirituality and culture of Native people. Yet, activism goes much deeper. Brook spoke to how activism is generated from the heart, which is linked to our Onkwehonwe spirituality, culture and epistemology:

The Unity Run is a form of activism because a message was brought to the Six Nations Grand River Haudenosaunee People. As well, a message was sought out on that journey. So, the Haudenosaunee answered that call with action to explain to the world the Great Law of Peace and asked us, the youth to learn the history. Even before it got to Grand River, it moved forward in a way to help our people to become
stronger, more aware, more knowledgeable, and healthier... wholistically. Activism is the act of doing something, and that’s what the Unity Run was all about. There is no separating culture and spirituality from being Onkwehonwe; it’s a very important part of activism. A lot of times from what I know, have witnessed, and have been part of, [activism] generates from the heart. By taking action on something that you think is important and needs to be done, your heart is what makes the action happen. Your heart is linked to spirituality and culture, there’s no separating it from being Onkwehonwe or really just being. (Brook, youth participant, 2011)

This brought me to wonder what was at the heart of their action—what motivated these youth to take action. The next area of this chapter will explore the heart and motivation which guided these Native youth to partake in a youth-driven and youth-led spiritual and culture-based journey of activism.

**The Motivation & the Spirit of the Youth**

While analyzing the conversations I had with the youth, three ways of describing themselves began to emerge: the “Seekers,” the “Unknowing” and the “Guides.” These particular groupings do not necessarily define the youth or their identity. However, when asked the question of what motivated them to participate in Unity Run and its planning and organization, the youth informed me that they were seeking a connection with their
culture, they were attracted to the group for various reasons, and/or they felt a responsibility as a Haudenosaunee person to lead by example.

The youth participants were asked if they knew who they were as a Haudenosaunee person and if they felt “secure” in their identity. They were also asked if they were brought up in a traditional Haudenosaunee culture and lifestyle, possibly possessing a Haudenosaunee language, cultural knowledge and knowing the values and ethics of being a Haudenosaunee citizen. Regardless, these youth were seeking a greater understanding of the world and a sense of purpose to life. There were also those individuals who knew that they were Native 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 with their identity for various reasons.

Regardless of whether an individual knew very much about their Onkwehonwe identity or not, all the participants in this study spoke to the importance and value of “helping.” Interestingly, in many Native communities the value of “helping” is very significant and coincides with maintaining the collective, as well as contributing to the larger picture of the earth and natural environment. Steph, whom I defined as a “seeker,” explained that she wanted to become involved with the Elder’s Summit and the SOY Unity Runs because it coincided with “our job and responsibility as Onkwehonwe people to the bigger picture of us on earth” (Steph, youth participant, 2011).

“Responsibility” and “helping” among the Haudenosaunee people also relate to our duty as human beings. This duty is outlined within the first two sections of the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen (Thanksgiving Address), which specifies that we acknowledge the
Creator and bring the minds of our people together in a good way. In doing so, we begin to acknowledge as a collective our gratitude for everything living upon the Earth and beyond.

*Ne kati; tenshitewanonhweronat'ne Shonkwaya’tison*
So then we will offer our greetings to the Creator.

*Tayethinonhweronatohseke ne Onkwe’shoná. Etho Kati nenyothonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.*
We continue to offer our greetings to all the people. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

*Tayethinonhweronatohseke ne Yethi’nihstenha tsi yonhwetsyate. Etho kati nenyothonhake ne onkwa’nikonra.*
We continue to offer our greetings to the Earth, Our Mother. There, then that is the way it will be in our minds.

(www.quintemohawkschool.org/thanksgiving.html)

As we listen to the *Ohenton Karihwatehkwen*, it reminds us to be humble and that we as human beings are to be grateful. We are provided a deeper understanding of the philosophy and values within the *Ohenton Karihwatehkwen* which was provided to us by our Creator. Therefore, I wanted to understand a little more about *Ohenton Karihwatehkwen* and referred to a much more detailed version by Enos Williams thowenninekén:’on (Kanonhweratonhtshera) (Cornelius, 1999). Enos Williams’ forty-four page translation (from Mohawk to English) provided a deeper insight into the responsibilities and duties we as Onkwehonwe have to every living and spiritual entity within this world (Cornelius, 1999). Nevertheless, both versions of the *Ohenton Karihwatehkwen* express the same intent in humbly bringing our minds together and reminding ourselves that every living aspect of creation has a responsibility. For
Onkwehonwe people this means we must acknowledge and offer our gratitude to Shonkwaya’tíso (the Creator) for what he has set forth on this earth. This brings to mind the concept of “helping” which is much more than an idea or intent, it is an “action” which encompasses our collective knowledge, values and responsibility as a people. Nathan sums up the realization that all the participants experienced on this journey:

> It’s pretty eye opening… to realize that there’s much bigger things than besides yourself, it makes you feel so small in the world of the bigger things. It’s almost like you’re an ant, but it takes all the ants to accomplish the task you have to accomplish; everybody is equally important. (Nathan, youth participant, 2011)

Creation is so much bigger than ourselves. By undertaking the action of “helping” as an unequivocal collective, we nurture and contribute to our overall survival. However, “helping” is more than an act or an action; for the Haudenosaunee it begins with the “Good Mind.” Our collective effort of “compassion, caring, kindness and generosity” through such actions of “helping” demonstrate to ourselves and each other how we construct and maintain our “Good Mind.” The “Good Mind” is about the “positive, loving, peaceful, kind intent” that we have for the well-being of our families and community and the well-being of all living entities; this intent ensures that life continues peacefully for future generations (Jacques, 1991).

Unfortunately, many young Native people have endured the legacy of generations of historical trauma which has been bestowed upon their families and communities
(Brave Heart, 1999 & 2000; Gagné, 1998; Chrisjohn, Young & Maraun, 2006; Fournier & Crey, 1997). There are a few families that have protected the cultural knowledge, though much has been lost through the passing of our Elders (Martin-Hill et al., 2008). Native youth today have been challenged with not having a traditional upbringing or a strong sense of cultural identity due to trying to walk in two worlds as indicated in the Two Row Wampum (Jake Thomas cited in Hill, 1990). By not having the cultural knowledge, support and skills, some Native youth are resorting to numbing or finding ways to escape through Mind Changers\(^{11}\) (Thomas & Boyle, 1994; Mitchell, 1984). Not all Native youth realize that they have choices and opportunities; they believe that their choices are non-existent or limited (Duran and Duran, 1995). Shelly, whom I identify as a “Seeker,” has indicated that she has had a Haudenosaunee upbringing and explains to me that her purpose in wanting to “help” with the Unity Run was to see what other youth were experiencing in their communities, as well to get away from the “distress” that she experienced on a daily basis in her community:

To me it meant that I could help out other people, go to other communities to see what their youth were about, because what we had here was not enough. It was distressing to see so many people passing away. That was the year my friend died and I lost my boyfriend the previous summer to a drinking and driving accident. It was just so

\(^{11}\) Mind Changer is the first of the “Four Major Matters or Major Wrongs” referred to in Kariwiio or the Code of Handsome Lake. This has made Shongwayadihs, the Creator “…feel sad when your relations delighted in consuming strong drink [alcohol]” (Thomas & Boyle, 1994, p. 29). “It was given to our white brothers in a form of medicine…. For the Onkwehonwe it will bring great misery and hardship” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 73). Both Jake Thomas & Terry Boyle (1994) and Michael Mitchell (1984) refer to the Mind Changer as alcohol in Kariwiio. Many traditional people would include the use and abuse of additive substance and even behaviours as “Mind Changers.” Therefore, “Mind Changers” alter the proper use of the “Good Mind.”
many things piling up. I was wondering if other communities were
having the same problem with the youth, just drinking and driving and
going into accidents. (Shelly, youth participant, 2011)

Even those youth who have had a Haudenosaunee upbringing and an understanding of
their culture, question the environment in which they live as well as the lack of resources
for youth (Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995). Shelly stated in our conversation that the
communities the Unity Run and Spirit of the Youth visited did not experience the amount
of deaths through drinking and driving which Six Nations did. She concluded that these
smaller communities had a smaller population and that the youth were able to walk from
place to place within their community while drinking and using substances.

Native youth are aware of many stressors, problems and the oppression within
their communities which contribute to the demoralizing conditions of their communities
(McKenzie & Morrissett, 2003; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Thomas & Bellefeuille, 2006;
Dillard & Manson, 2000; RCAP, 2006; Duran and Duran, 1995; Ball, 1998; Hill, Antone
and Myers, 1980; Robin et al., 1996; Mason et al., 1996; Gagné, 1998; Lederman, 1999;
Duran et al., 1998; Morrissette et al., 1993; Freeman, 2005; Quinn, 2007). Phoebe, an
adult supporter for the Spirit of the Youth group, explains from her perspective what
motivates youth in participating with the Unity Run:

There were a lot of people who had come on and they were looking for
something. They didn’t know what they were looking for, but they were
looking for something. There were people who went on it to get away
from the environments that they were living in at home. To get away from drugs, to get away from alcohol, to get away from abuse… just to have an experiences that was meaningful, as opposed to this kind of MTV existence. So, yah there are a couple of people that I can think of, one who I spend a lot of time with today who was struggling so hard at that time and was very much in to drugs and stuff, and has COMPLETELY turned around and went in a clean clear direction and it was as a result of being involved in something that had meaning.

(Phoebe, adult participant, 2011)

Phoebe identifies the fact that youth are facing many obstacles within their lives which prevent them getting involved with something positive. The ethno-stress (Hill, Antone, & Myers, 1986) experienced in Native families and communities have led some young people to make troubling choices due to the hopelessness they are experiencing. When youth are offered an experience that is positive, involves their peers and has meaning and purpose such as the Unity Run, it offers an opportunity for change. However, it is up to the youth themselves to embrace that experience and make that change. A couple of males who were on the Unity Run from the same community, Sammy and Nathan, discuss their reasons for participating on the Unity Run journey.

Sammy: The reason I went… well, I was going through some personal stuff… getting in trouble and everything. He’s the one who told me to go. I didn’t have a plan, it was maybe 12 hrs before…. He
was like, do you want to go? Okay. I had to get away from here. I was going through some personal stuff and… spur of the moment… 8 o’clock at night. I was like should I or shouldn’t I? Should I stay or should I go? He kept telling me I should go on it. I was like… oh, I might as well go. I wasn’t doing anything. I was just getting in to trouble here. So, I decide to go. (Sammy, youth participant, 2011)

Nathan: I had to convince you to come. I’ve seen what he was going through. I already made up my mind, I was going to go and I wasn’t going to leave my best friend here to deal with his own stuff. So… you have to come. There is no way I’m leaving you here, you have to go. But when I heard about it, it was definitely something I was interested in. I always felt like it was my responsibility to be a role model for the younger children. That there are role models older, that aren’t into drinking, that aren’t into drugs, aren’t into partying… there isn’t many. I wanted youth to know there is someone to look up to. I thought it was a good opportunity to show the youth that if you have a clean mind and a clean spirit you can accomplish things and not have to feel like you have to be in the “in crowd” or anything like that. (Nathan, youth participant, 2011)

Sammy was at a place in his life where the internal stress and turmoil he was feeling was affected by many external pressures within his environment, therefore influencing poor
choices and getting him in trouble. Whereas Nathan on the other hand, recognizes that he “was not going to leave his best friend to deal with his own stuff” and identifies that there were not too many role models within his community. Nathan, not really knowing what he is going into by participating in the Unity Ride and Run, decided that he wanted to be that role model for the children in his community by being the example in having “a clean mind and a clean spirit to accomplish” whatever they both wanted.

Watenonsiiostha was also another youth who indicated that she was not in a good place in her life until she discovered the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run as it was travelling through her community. She figured that she would “warm up to the idea” if she participated. As she became more involved with the group and the journey, she discovered the joy and pride of being Haudenosaunee. Watenonsiiostha shares her perspective:

I wasn’t quite interested, but I wasn’t in a very good place in my life at the same time. I figured I’d warm up to the idea, thinking it would be a nice way to clear my head and meet different people, and expand my horizons. When I went out there and I saw everybody, I started to get a little excited. I thought, “yah, I could do this. I can stay out here for a long time.” I didn’t know what I was going to do with myself after I got done, when it was all finished, I wasn’t thinking much about it. As the Unity Run went on and I got to talk to and meet everybody, I really enjoyed myself. I had a really good time. Actually, I had a lot of fun. It was fun camping. I’d just met my husband at the time and both of us figured it would be a good way to just get away from everything that
was bothering us. When I started going, I realized what most of the people were actually there for… to keep us strong as Haudenosaunee people. (Watenonsiioosta, youth participant, 2011)

Sammy and Watenonsiioosta were both experiencing personal troubles in their lives and I defined them in this research as “Unknowing Seekers” as they participated with the Unity Run. Whereas Nathan was determined to be a role model and went to participate in the Unity Run unknowing, thus placing him as an “Unknowing Guide.” By taking themselves out of their environment, traveling the land and surrounding themselves with their culture and other youth, they were all able to find support, cultural strength, friendship and pride in who they are as Haudenosaunee. The Unity Ride and Run was more than taking youth out of their communities and on a “trip.” Dakota, who was on the 2004 Unity Ride with her mother and sister Jessie, expressed the importance of “being on the land” and understanding the “responsibility” on a personal level which leads to an understanding of “responsibility” on a broader level as a Haudenosaunee person:

Unity Ride… had a huge impact on my own life. It was a removal from community life and the things that were surrounding us. It was a chance to be on the land, just be yourself and what you’re capable of. 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, 2011)

Dakota and Jessie would be considered as “Unknowing Seekers” in their first experience with the 2004 Okanagan Unity Ride and Run and later became “Guides” when participating in the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run.

There were other youth who had no idea what they were about to participate in. Tsiehente, a young Mohawk girl explains: “I really didn’t know what it was. I got dragged into it by my mom who works with youth and stuff like that” (Tsiehente, youth participant, 2011). Jon another youth who had other ideas about what he would do with his summer was strongly encouraged by his sisters and father to participate in the Unity Run, and explains:

My sisters were both very involved in the group from the beginning…. My Dad was very adamant about me going, because up until that point I was not very involved… I was busy with other things… when the day was getting close to leave my Dad was talking [to my sisters] about going and it hadn’t really crossed my mind at the time about going or not. Well, because I really didn’t want to spend my summer running. [My sister] talked to me and my Dad talked to me, and they convinced me it would be a good thing to go. Just to have a better spiritual understanding, to culture and everything. Learn from all the people that were going to be there. So I decided to go. It turned out to be a really
good experience. Really, really, fun. I met a lot of good people and
learned a lot of nice and awesome stuff about the culture that I hadn’t
known up until that point. (Jon, youth participant, 2011)

For both Tsiehente and Jon, who had no idea what they were about to experience and
would be placed as “Unknowing,” by not having expectations they both agreed that their
experience was fun, positive, and that they learned a lot about their culture and met a lot
of good people.

The motivation of “helping” also stems from possessing a “Good Mind” or that
“positive intent” which can be the motivation to support those youth who do not possess
a “secured identity” as an Onkwehonwe person. Emma who was brought up in a
Haudenosaunee lifestyle expresses her motivation in participating with the Spirit of the
Youth group and the Unity Run:

One of the biggest things that made me want to help was realizing that
there are a lot of people that do not know who they are. A girl asked a
simple question to the youth leader (male) who was helping with the
Youth Summit, she asked how come they were sitting in squares…
[rather than] a circle? They had no really good response to her and told
her that. It really put her down, hurt her feelings. It was done in a
really bad way. For us we don’t think like that, I grew up very
traditional, so seeing them not being able to explain to her why we are
were sitting in a square having a forum, even though she had a valid
point to why they should be sitting in a circle. They did not want to
hear it, and that to me represented a disconnection—you can be really educated or really traditional, there wasn’t a medium ground. That is why I actually got involved, because I found that there were a lot of young people in our community that did not grow up like I did. They did not have the same upbringing, who did not know where they came from, who were adopted out. They were really trying to figure out who they were. I have always known who I was, my mom made sure that we knew who we were. That is why I actually got involved because I thought they could benefit from not being dictated to, and shown. Also, I was the same age as them and I knew a lot of stuff that they did not. They might have been really educated at the time, but I had come from a very different background than they could even comprehend. (Emma, youth participant, 2011)

Emma recognizes that there are two parallel systems of knowledge, the settler culture and Western education and the integrity of the cultural knowledge of Onkwehonwe and/or Haudenosaunee people through the natural world and environment. For Emma these two worlds “represent a disconnection” with no “medium ground.” The same is true as spoken in the Two Row Wampum; Native people and the non-Native people have their own beliefs and values which define their cultures, but as the Elders share those paths never cross (Miller & Thomas, cited by Hill, 1990). When a Native person chooses to cross over to or has been born into the other culture, they have the choice once they are aware to come back to their Native culture. However, as Jake Thomas and Huron Miller
(Hill, 1990) explain the story of the Two Row Wampum, if we have Native people in the Whiteman’s ship, it is our responsibility to continue to guide those Native people. Emma recognizes the “disconnect” that Native youth struggle with and is willing to take the responsibility as a “Guide” to assist those who are “Seeking” to understand their Native culture by “showing” what it is to be Native through demonstrating cultural values, showing how to have a “Good Mind” and sharing the knowledge and stories that were shared with her.

Gusenneeyoh sums up what many Native youth were searching for, that sense of “camaraderie” within their peer group and a positive outlet on a wholistic level which involves culture, knowledge and language:

seeing there was a group here at Six Nations that was wanting to get more youth involved in language, culture and the revitalization process [and]… an outlet to do things and express yourself, [rather than] always having to be at a party or drinking or getting into trouble. I guess that’s what drew me into [the Spirit of the Youth group]. Helping and knowing that they were going to do this Run to Onondaga. I thought that was something important, that we were going back to our Council Fire. I was all up for that.

Everyone that ended up joining the group were just hanging out with each other and trying to get money and figuring out how to plan the route, it was good camaraderie and it was fun. So that’s basically how I ended getting involved with the first Run. I’d just wanted to see
it through to the end. I eventually did recruit other people, and they had a good time. (Gusenneeyoh, youth participant, 2011)

Whether youth possess a level of cultural knowledge through their upbringing or are at the beginning stages of searching for and understanding their heritage, the motivation for Native youth to be involved in a cultural experience is that it is youth centered has a clear direction, has members with responsibility, is fun, and welcomed like-minded youth. Gusenneeyoh’s mother Garnette stated that the Spirit of the Youth Group and their commitment to carry forward this Unity Run “was really something... seeing this group of youth. Watching them laugh, cry, get mad, and forgive. It was really nice to see” (Garnette, 2011). Garnette became involved as a parent when her daughter joined the Spirit of the Youth “to connect with the community as a youth.” While this was a youth-centered initiative, the cultural value of involving adults, parents and Elders as support, guidance and cultural resources was important. The youth had every opportunity to express and be themselves. Gusenneeyoh explains, “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” (Gusenneeyoh, youth participant, 2011).

The adults, parents and Elders who were involved with the Spirit of the Youth became involved because they wanted to help, and the youth sought out these adults for the experience they had on previous Unity Rides and Run with questions about why they
did it and the experience they had. Josie, one of the parents on the Unity Run, talked about how this journey would be a “good educational experience” for her children, and that they “witness a reclaiming and a rebuilding of culture, across indigenous cultures” (Josie, 2011). Dean, another parent, mentioned that his participation with the Unity Ride and Runs was because he had worked with youth for most of his life and saw this as something positive for the youth. Phoebe, who participated on a couple of the Unity Rides and Runs prior to 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” (Phoebe, 2011). Phoebe’s insight provided support to those youth who would be transformed by this experience, and her motivation to “helping” provided guidance and support to the youth while they were participating on the Unity Runs.

A significant part for this journey for the youth, who organized the Unity Run, was the organizational process. This experience brought a sense of worth and fun to all who participated. Mandy explains that even some of the challenges the youth members endured over their five-year commitment to the Unity Run, the hard work and dedication, shaped and reaffirmed who they are as Onkwehonwe people:

I think it was hard for young people, but it’s worth it. I guess and that’s basically where it’s at, if we’re going to exist in the future. A lot of stuff we’re doing technically we should be doing as Clans. But there’s no basis for that right now, even the Clans that try it’s still not working. I can’t even image a Clan organizing the Unity Run or anybody else,
really. Or even the Nation or even people who are already leaders, I can’t image them doing that... and having fun at the same time. You know it would be more like a job, but for us it was fun. It was motivating in itself. Even though we were never on the Unity Run before, we had no idea what it was about. (Mandy, youth participant, 2011)

Mandy recognizes the struggle that we as Haudenosaunee people and as a community go through as a result of colonization, assimilation and our attempts as a people to hold on to our culture, our language and our knowledge before it is lost. Because we as a people are so stressed in trying to maintain the survival of these important cultural elements, it becomes “a job” to many of us. Youth involvement and organization with the Unity Rides and Run brought a youthful perspective towards the way we participant in life, learning and fun. Many of the skills learned can be transferred and used in other life situations.

The next chapter explores the further findings of this study and the impact this journey had on the views and identity of the youth who participated with the Unity Rides and Runs. The participants involved in this study share their perspectives on how this experience has touched their lives and improved their well-being as people, as well as having had a dramatic influence on the core of their being and their identity as Onkwehonwe person.
Chapter 5: The Findings, Part 2 – The Journey

The Unity Run was not just about the physicality of running and walking across the country. This journey was a spiritual course which connected the youth and adults to each other, to their culture and cultural knowledge and epistemology on a wholistic level (body, mind, emotion and spirit), as well as being a communal and ecological connection with the land and natural surroundings (Verney, 2004). Steph referred to this journey as “rich” on every level including “all the friendships” that were created along the way. The Unity Rides and Runs also provided an understanding of the important responsibility we have as individuals and as a collective to ensure the survival of our natural environment and our cultural epistemology for our children’s children, and their children. Seneca scholar, John Mohawk writes that:

human being[s] create… an awareness of families and nations, but these things only become real when humans become real, when humans fulfill their individual obligation to attend to the spirit of the nation and the spirit of the family… just as one must act in a certain way to make a family real or a nation real, so must one live the Creator’s way to realize real life. (Barreiro, 2010, p.4)

The journey explores the “realness” as John Mohawk expresses it which these participants experienced as a result of their involvement with the Unity Run. The journey
brought awareness and transformation as a result of the spiritual and cultural experience involved.

As I spoke with each participant, I asked them to share their memories and/or stories of the Unity Ride and Run. Most participants sat for a few moments to recall those experiences. As I waited for each to share what they felt comfortable in sharing, I witnessed a shift in their disposition and demeanor as they relaxed and pondered their journey. All the youth and adults smiled, laughed, and spoke with excitement and pride as they reminisced and relived their adventures in their minds. Yet for a few youth and adults, some memories resurfaced of frustration and angst concerning the oppressive and racial incidences which they experienced along their journey. Despite some of the challenges, all the participants shared insightful thoughts and reported personal growth which continues to resonate to this day in their adult lives. It is through such experiences that one learns about themselves and the world around them. John Mohawk expresses the importance and impact experiences such as these have in our lives as Onkwehonwe people:

Experience verifies again and again the laws of the Creation. One learns from water as one learns from hawks or deer. The actual experiences of learning the ways of the Creation come when one learns from a real hawk, and not from the image of a hawk. From a man-made image of a hawk one learns about the creator of the image, and from a real hawk one learns of the plan of the real Creator. One knows that a hawk is a spiritual being enacting a role in the Great Plan of Life, that it
is spiritually one with deer and man, and only from the hawk may a human being learn of the nature of that relationship.

That is why it is not possible for a person to find a spiritual life through written or spoken words. To discover one’s relationship to the wind, one must experience wind, and to know the spirit of the sun, one must experience the sun. To discover a spiritual life, one must experience spirit, and that means one must live a spiritual way, both personally and in the human community. (Barreiro, 2010, p. 5)

The journey is about the experience in which one has internalized what they have learned (Brant-Castellano, 2000). Jon shares his thoughts regarding experiential learning verses classroom learning. He says that in classroom learning students are “fed” material and that students “can’t really ask questions” because those teaching the material “don’t really know themselves”: “I have had experiences in the classroom trying to learn about all this stuff, and it just seemed dull… boring and it wasn’t presented in an interesting way to me” (Jon, interview participant, 2011). For Jon, the Unity Run demonstrated what people were talking about and living regarding various sources of knowledge such as culture, land, natural medicines, traditions, etc.. As well, people were kind and open in sharing this information with him.

It felt like it was easier to take it all in because we were experiencing it day by day…. You take a lot more in because there were emotions behind it and everyone was very close, and into it. The good thing
about the Unity Run is that all these people are experiencing the same things and they all have their own views on stories and things that happen…. You learn something from somebody and then you learn a different point of view from somebody else and then you can build your own knowledge after that which is a lot more interesting than having one point of view put at you. It’s definitely a lot more thorough and rounded off knowledge. (Jon, youth participant, 2011)

Such experiences contribute to lifelong skills (Brant-Castellano, 2000). Emma shared a number of experiences from assisting and organizing the Unity Run route to making connections within various communities. She also talked about the importance of promotion and awareness of the Unity Runs by offering cultural workshops and seeking funds. One memorable experience she spoke about was when she travelled with another youth organizer to South Dakota. Her travel companion wanted to help her overcome her fear of horses. So, they drove into a horse ranch with 100 horses. She was left in the car by herself to “bond with horses.” This is her response to this experience: “He had this big thing that the best way to overcome something was doing it. He didn’t realize at the time, it’s a good thought, but if the person is not emotionally ready you can’t force them to do something.” Emma brings up an important point in regards to emotional readiness on such a journey. Interestingly, the journey does not wait for us to be ready. Experiences arise whether we are ready for them or not; it is up to us to decide how far and how rapidly we move through the life lesson which is presented.

Emma shared another story from the same South Dakota trip about lessons not being learned unless you were in a particular situation. Emma and her travel companion
were bunked up in a cabin for the duration of their stay and met an elderly couple with their grandson who were sleeping in their van. Emma and her companion offered the elderly couple and their grandson the cabin, and also shared all the food that they had. Many of the people at this gathering questioned why they would give everything away. Emma responded, “why not?” Below Emma shares what she and her companion learned from this experience:

A lot of people out there couldn’t see why we would give up everything that we had. We had our own set of food, but we kept donating it to their feast. Without thinking, we just kept donating. Those things were the things you couldn’t learn about unless you were in that situation and learning the values of being Haudenosaunee. Other Native people had a different way of thinking. They kept saying that we had to think for ourselves because we would go hungry, they kept coming we kept offering… that experience in itself really shaped the way that we thought about the other person. (Emma, youth participant, 2011)

Not only did this provide a life lesson to the two youth, it also illustrated the diversity in thinking and values between varying Native groups. For Emma and her travel companion, their actions asserted their Haudenosaunee values and upbringing.

Prior to the Unity Rides and Run arriving to various communities in Haudenosaunee territory, some youth were presented an opportunity to expand their knowledge and respect for other Native cultures and groups. Dakota and Jesse talked
about their experience on the 2004 Unity Ride and the “huge impact” it had on their lives. The young women spoke about the respect they had for the Lakota and the Okanagan people they travelled with. On this Unity Ride, the young women referred to a group of older Lakota horsemen as the “Cowboys.” It is from these older men that Dakota and Jesse learned about the importance of the horse in Lakota culture. The young women also expressed the great respect they had for the Unity Ride leader, Eric, as well for as the Elders who provided guidance and care for all the participants on the journey. Nonetheless, the richness of their experience came from the closeness and deep respect these two young women developed as they travelled with their mother on this journey. They referred to the Unity Ride as a “healing journey” for their family as their mother connected back to the stories and memories of her brother (their uncle) as he travelled on the “White Roots of Peace” and the “Unity Caravan” back in the 1970s. It was also thrilling for both the young women to travel into many Haudenosaunee communities and discover how many Elders and community people knew and respected their parents. Dakota shared the story that was told to her by the Elders on the Unity Ride, of how they met her father when he was a young man. As the two young women spoke about the stories and the various connections their parents had with communities and Elders, I could see the pride they had for both their parents. Jesse shares that “The Unity Run is an opportunity to reacquaint yourself with people from my parent’s past and find out a little bit about what it was like to grow up the way my parents did” (Jesse, youth participant, 2011). This experience also provided a different perspective and a different way of life from what these youth have been accustomed to seeing and living.
Not all youth had one or both parents on the Unity Ride or Runs. For some youth the Unity Run was “like building a family on the road” (Yvonne, youth leader, 2011). One of the youth leaders shared that she could recognize those youth who possessed a great need for love and belonging and expressed that “maybe at home they were outcast, or they get to the stage that they’re trying to disconnect or break away... or… their parents are not giving them that love, or expressing it, or are not around. Yeah, you could tell the ones that could feel the sense of belonging—they thrived in that environment, and they helped. They helped a lot” (Yvonne, youth leader, 2011). This brings attention to an important cultural value in many Native communities, the significance of family and community in a person’s life. Unfortunately, in many Native communities the effects of colonization, residential schools, the sixties/millennium scoop have taken a dramatic toll on the health and social structures of the family, affecting children and youth in turn.

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 experience in their family is how they will 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 youth 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, the close
friendships they formed and the experiences they went through on the Unity Run brought them together as a “family”: “You’ve come so close with the ones you’ve been on the Run they become your family… it’s like your actual family” (Nathan, interview participant, 2011). Shelly shares that a sense of family was important on the Unity Run. 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, 2011)

She continued on 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.

An important part of the journey was the cultural part; however many of the youth participants spoke about the important ways for them to create and build upon the relationships they were establishing. The Unity Rides and Run had cultural, ceremonial protocols which were followed, but it was just as important for the youth to experience the freedom to enjoy themselves and have fun. The youth participants spoke about the
fun they had during evening Socials (traditional singing and dancing), the places they swam after a long day of running, the nicknames they gave each other, sitting around the campfire at night sharing and laughing at some of the incidents of the day, playing and watching lacrosse, making two hundred egg sandwiches, the harmless teasing of each other, as well as some of the innocent jokes they played on one another. This is not to say that there were not fights or misunderstandings along the journey—there were. During these times the youth learned how to work through their anger and frustrations with support and guidance from their peers, Elders and the adults. Shelly spoke about a misunderstanding two boys had where the anger between the two carried on for a couple of days and was affecting the group. One of the Elders spoke to the boys and told them; “you have two choices: you can sit and talk or you can go pick your red whips.”12 The boys shrieked at the suggestion of the red whips. Yet, it did get their attention. The boys sat with the Elder and talked their differences away, while the Elder talked about the importance in “carrying the good message.”

Some of the parents and adults who travelled with the Unity Rides and SOY Unity Run expressed that the first year and the last year were the hardest because the number of youth who participated increased and there was a lack of parental supervision and increased use of drugs and alcohol by youth on the journey: “So we had to straighten them out, we told them and advised them, but we ended up being parents” (Dean, adult participant, 2011). Phoebe remembers an incident when some youth were caught “smoking weed” in the last two days before the SOY Unity Run ended. Those youth who had concerns with this behaviour formed a large talking circle in which every person

12 Red whips are branches that come from a specific willow from the wood and are used as a traditional form of punishment in Haudenosaunee culture.
spoke their mind and what was in their heart regarding the incident. Three quarters of the way through the circle, a boy spoke up and was the first to admit his wrongdoing in taking the drugs, and that he felt bad about it. He expressed that he should not be holding the staffs\textsuperscript{13} and that he shouldn’t be participating. As soon as this boy admitted his wrongdoing, every single youth that was involved also admitted their wrongdoing. The group as a whole discussed what to do with them. It was decided that according to what every youth agreed and signed at the beginning of each Unity Run, drug use would not be tolerated and they would be sent home. Phoebe expressed that she found it interesting that the youth brought this incident up, the youth raised it, and the youth dealt with it: “Growing up in this kind of society we don’t talk about things. So, they broke that cycle and I think that is going to make a huge change in their lives” (Phoebe, adult interview participant, 2011).

Steph shares some of the transformations she witnessed with youth who participated 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]

\textsuperscript{13} The Staffs are sacred objects which were made from a tree or a branch and decorated with eagle feathers, buffalo fur, horse tail hair, ribbons, tobacco ties, etc. These sacred objects would be put through ceremony and carried by the runners and riders during their sacred journey.
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, 2011)

I wondered if the impact or the transformation which these youth experienced stemmed from their connection to the land and the natural environment or the physicality of running. I posed this question to a number of the youth and parents in this study. Josie 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 brought a “hands on, minds on, and 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 very ancestors whose everyday villages were founded on a
connection to the land” (Josie, adult participant, 2011). 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 leader, 2011)

For Indigenous people, we have a relationship and connection to the land and territory which we are born upon. However, this land relationship and connection is more than our epistemology and foundation of knowledge, it is our direct connection to our ancestors and to those unborn children of future generations. John Mohawk articulates that our traditional Haudenosaunee philosophy and knowledge stems from our connection to the earth and natural world:
The Human Beings who walk upon the Earth are beings of the Creation. They are spirits also, a part of the processes that support Life. If we look about us at the Natural World, we can see that many people call themselves the Natural or Real People. The People who call themselves by these names know that they are a part of Creation…. This respect for the Natural World is a manifestation of great wisdom, for it is based on the knowledge that from the flesh of the Earth will come their own flesh and that of their future generations. (Barreiro, 2010, p. 9)

Therefore, when the youth and their adult supporters share their awareness and connections they have with the natural world and land, it is because we know that we have to “be respectful of the living things on earth, for they all represent a power to sustain life…. Natural People know also that they are both observers of the Creation and actors in the Creation… responsible actors” (Barreiro, 2010, p. 9-10). The Natural People are “spiritual proprietors of the Universe” (p. 10) explains Mohawk (2010), but not in a Western sense of claims of ownership or possession of the universe, earth or living entities. Mohawk (2010) is referring to our daily commitment and active participation in celebrating and giving thanks for all life which is more than a religion, it is a “Way of Life” (p. 10). The Unity Run is a journey back to the healing and a (re)connection to our “Way of Life” as we once knew it. Tsiehente speaks of her experience and how it “spiritually brought more of a connection to who we are—more meaning. You understand and appreciate things more now than you did.” Mindy
expresses that the Unity Run brought an understanding in how to live this “Way of Life” by keeping her body and mind pure and strong, eating healthy, and learning her language, culture and the Great Law: “It’s re-centering yourself and saying, this is who I am regardless of what clothes I wear… and to be the best you can be as an Onkwehonwe” (Mindy, youth participant, 2011).

What was prevalent in all the memories and stories from the youth and adult participants of the Unity Run was the “hope and pride” they felt along the journey. As well, the powerful and positive response the youth received from Elders and the people who welcomed the group into their community was overwhelming. Steph shared one memory regarding the overall response the youth received when they arrived in the Mohawk community of Akwesasne and how community members were “moved to tears” when they realized the sacrifice these youth had made and the great undertaking of running across our territories bringing to life the cultural integrity of the Haudenosaunee people:

just seeing the hope that people had after they seen us running… being motivated and committed to something. You could see it in their eyes, their expressions, their tears, their words—there’s hope for our young ones, for our people at large. Running into Akwesasne was one of them…. When we ran into there, there were just so many people standing along the road and cheering us on. You could just see the hope and the pride. The energy was just so high and beautiful. Those
moments were what kept a lot of us going. (Steph, youth participant, 2011)

This emotional, physical, spiritual and mindful response from the community not only contributed to keeping the youth going on their journey, it also provided positive reinforcement to the youth regarding their cultural and collective identity. The next section of this chapter will explore the youths’ views and responses regarding their identity as Onkwehonwe as a result of the journey.

**Onkwehonwe Identity**

Identity among Indigenous people is far more in-depth than cultural values and uniqueness as a people. Native identity is an understanding of the connection to and significance of place by means of the earth and the natural environment. Native identity also involves understanding the importance of relationship and the responsibility we have on a personal and collective level to the earth and universe, and how that contributes to back to us as a People. In this section, the youth and adults discuss the how the SOY Unity Run provided an opportunity to actively understand their cultural identity, and how this experience/journey contributed well beyond their youth into their adult lives.

The two female youth who were selected as leaders and organizers for the Spirit of the Youth and the Unity Run, identified that some of their peers participating in this journey may have lacked the support or knowledge regarding their cultural identity. Yvonne speaks about the struggles Native youth endured and the opportunity the Unity Run provide for the youth to learn and come together:
all kinds of stuff stems from the lack of identity: like drinking, drugs and lack of motivation and falling into bad crowds. I mean not only identity, but support. Even the ones that do want… [their identity], maybe there’s not much support for them. Maybe they don’t have many friends… or maybe they don’t have somewhere to go where they can feel that connection. Maybe they feeling isolated and they feel like the black sheep, and they may give up. They might just want to give in and go with the rest of them. I know that was one of my struggles… growing up. I didn’t want to drink and I didn’t want to do the party scene, and I did not have many friends. I think that’s what helped a lot with the Spirit of the Youth, pretty much everybody that helped weren’t into that either and that we were all able to come together as a group. [To] be happy, laugh together, organize together and give an opportunity to other young people. (Yvonne, youth leader, 2011)

Among the youth who were participants on the Unity Run, their identity ranged from having a “secure” Haudenosaunee identity, meaning that they grew up with the knowledge of their clan and nation and had an “Indian Name,” to those youth who felt “insecure” with their identity. A majority of the participants fell in between a “secure identity” and an “unknowing identity,” meaning they had some idea of their identity as a Haudenosaunee or as Native person, but they did not have the support or connections those with “secure identity” may have had. This may have been due to the various
experiences across generations of enduring the effects of residential school, disenfranchisement, the sixties scoop, racism—it may have been safer to negate an identity as a Native person rather than endure the overt coercion of oppression. Unfortunately, for those children and young people who had to grow up confused and questioning their identity, it leaves them in a “perplexed” state of “searching” for a connection and understanding to their identity and their culture. The Unity Rides and Run provided an opportunity for all individuals in varying states of identity to connect and (re)connect with their Onkwehonwe or “Real Selves” on a deeper level, to connect with Creation and with others (Barreiro, 2010).

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.” Growing up in mainstream society you kind of lose sight of yourself as Native. They feed you things that you got to learn and how you got to act and how you got to be as a person, but none of it is spiritual. None of it is real. None of it really means Onkwehonwe. So, to a certain degree I didn’t think of myself as real. Just like a robot… programming you to be who they want you to be, not who you are. (Brook, youth participant, 2011)

Mindy shares that before the Unity Run she didn’t put any thought into her identity as an Onkwehonwe woman. She expressed that her family was “untraditional and we had no language or cultural background going into it.” By having an opportunity to converse and learn from cultural knowledge keepers and Clan Mothers while on the Unity Run, Mindy was “inspired” to learn more about her responsibility and role as a Haudenosaunee woman:

Before the 2006 [Unity] Run, I really hadn’t put any thought into my identity as an Onkwehonwe person. I didn’t know any of my responsibilities as a woman in our culture. We have a lot of responsibilities and a huge role to oversee on our nation and help build it. I was talking with… our Clan Mother who really inspired me. I think it was her talks that inspired me to take on a role and make sure that what I do… [and] my personal focus is about enhancing myself and
my people. Making sure that everything I say, but a lot of what I do…
goes towards build people up. (Mindy, youth participant, 2011)

There were a few youth who were aware of their Native identity, but they did not realize
the importance of their culture in relation to their identity until they participated with the
Spirit of the Youth group on the Unity Run. As Jesse puts it, “I felt like I had woken up.
Before the Unity Ride happen, I never thought about being Native” (Jessie, youth
participant, 2011). Another youth expressed:

Yeah it’s not a big deal, I’m Native. I don’t really know a lot about
myself anyway. I don’t see the importance of it, but after the Unity
Run it made me realize that there is obviously an importance and it
made me want to seek out more information afterwards. (Jon, youth
participant, 2011)

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, 2011). For other Onkwehonwe youth who were brought up in the Longhouse
tradition, they seemed to “distance themselves from the Longhouse” due to family spilt
ups or because they viewed some people in the Longhouse as “closed minded.” One youth explained:

I went to the Longhouse a lot when I was a child. When I got to my adolescent years, my family split up and I figured it was best for me to stay away, because the people at the Longhouse I went to were very close-minded people. I did not like the way that they thought and if I was to bring outsiders into our Longhouse… not just “white people,” any sort of outside person that they did not know, it was always strange… I didn’t like that feeling and I didn’t want to be around those kinds of people. So I stopped going… I feel like the people who go to Longhouse consistently and religiously use it as a religion on other people. They make it seem like “you have to be there. You’re supposed be doing this.” But they’re not doing anything. They just assume other people are going to take over their responsibilities. So, I choose not to go. (Tsiehente, youth participant, 2011)

Another youth expressed:

My parents separated… I felt like I kind of ostracized myself from the Longhouse for a while. I felt so out of place. It felt like everything I was taught growing up was not really true. If it was true my parents
wouldn’t have separated like that. I’d just totally distance myself from
the Longhouse completely. (Nathan, youth participant, 2011)

The youth who grew up with a strong connection to their cultural identity may not have
questioned their identity as a Haudenosaunee. However, these youth did question the
foundational values which support and maintain their identity to their Longhouse
tradition and beliefs. This would leave these youth feeling, “yeah, I know I’m Native”
but “I don’t have that confidence in my culture as a Native person” (Tsiehente, youth
participant, 2011).

The Unity Run was a way of (re)connecting our 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”
(Nathan, youth participant, 2011). 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, “if you were yourself you would always be
Haudenosaunee, because that’s in your blood. So no matter what nation you are, what
nationality you are, if you are yourself you’ll always be those other things” (Emma, youth
participant, 2011). That is true to an extent. Those youth who do not have an understanding of who they are in accordance to their identity as an Onkwehonwe person question what it means to be part of a nation and part of a clan. The youth who were on the Unity Rides and Runs expressed that their participation 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. Dakota expresses that her identity as a Mohawk, Turtle Clan had never been questioned, because it was passed along to her through her mother’s bloodlines. The Unity Rides and Run did not provide Native youth with an identity. However, many young people sought to investigate further into their identity and seek information regarding the responsibilities which were associated with their identity as a Native person. Dakota shares her journey into understanding herself as a Mohawk Turtle Clan young woman:

There was never a question for me what my identity was, but it did get me to wondering what my identity should be. I know I am Mohawk, but I never thought about what does that mean? Does it mean that I go to Longhouse? Is it more than blood lines? Is it the work that I put towards being a Mohawk what makes me Mohawk or is it because my mother happens to have a clan? I never questioned any of this beforehand. My mother told me I was Mohawk, Turtle Clan and that was it… [The Unity Run] didn’t reaffirm anything.... All it did was… to get me to think about what my responsibilities because I am Mohawk. I am not just Mohawk. I can’t just say that anymore... I
know better… it would make me irresponsible with my identity. I have a responsibility towards it and to the people that would be my descendants one day. The Unity Ride made me start thinking about those things. (Dakota, youth participant, 2011)

For those youth who had a “secure identity” in knowing their nation and clan, the Unity Ride and Run provided a space and opportunity for them to learn more about their identity as a Haudenosaunee citizen and the responsibility on a social, political and spiritual level their citizenship meant to their Nation, family and clan and community.

Identity for Native people also encompasses a “sense of belonging.” By understanding your citizenship within your nation, clan and community, a person gains a sense of responsibility to participate in and contribute to maintaining the overarching social structure and organization which sustains their clan, nation, community and the natural world. The youth on the second and third year of the Unity Run had an opportunity to put into practice what they had learned about the structure, protocols and responsibilities of Haudenosaunee clans. Everyone who participated with the Unity Run, were grouped according to their clan. Those youth who were unaware of their clan or did not have a clan were appointed a clan. George-Kanentiio (2000) articulates the role and responsibility of the Haudenosaunee clan system:

A clan in former times took care of all its members from the time they were born until they died. Housing, food, health care, education, and employment were administered by the clans. Criminal acts and family
disputes were also adjudicated by the clan elders. Clans controlled marriages and ceremonial activities, and selected political representatives…. Adoption into a clan was a matter of national policy by the Iroquois since naturalization sustained the population while giving all individuals a sense of common purpose…. Once a person was accepted by a clan for adoption, he or she was considered an Iroquois citizen with full right and privileges. (George-Kanentiio, 2000, pp. 70-71)

Steph explains how the clan system worked during the Unity Run in organizing tasks and assigning responsibilities for all participants:

Anytime issues came up, we would go into our clans, discuss it and then we would counsel in the way of the Longhouse…. We divvied up the responsibilities at the camp site like dishes, setting up tents, cleaning up, wake up calls, and all kinds of stuff. There was no “authority” or “adults” coming over and saying, “you got to do this.” We had to organize it… we didn’t want to have one person being the boss saying “You do this, you do that.” It would just create resentment, ‘cause we’re all young, right…. We had a whole chart: the wolves had a certain chunk of responsibility one day, then the bears, and the turtles, and it just worked out awesome. It really was impressive to see it working and not just at Longhouse meetings, we did it on the Run and
we did it with everyday life stuff, and it worked out. (Steph, youth participant, 2011)

Not only did the clan system provide a “sense of belonging” and support for the individual youth on the Unity Run, it also structured responsibilities for accomplishing tasks, having discussions and problem solving within their small groups. The system of clans during the Unity Run provided an experiential understanding and appreciation of the traditional knowledge which structured the socio-political and spiritual system of Haudenosaunee. It also provided the youth with a real-life cultural practice in understanding the cultural conduct in which their leaders, family members, and now themselves can take part on a daily basis as citizens of their nation and clan.

The few adults who were on the Unity Rides and Run understood the struggles many youth have endured regarding their Haudenosaunee identity. One of the adults who participated on the Unity Ride and the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run expressed the importance of encouraging the youth to be who they are, and to learn their roles and customs. Dean witnessed many Native communities who did not have a connection to their culture. He went back to the youth on the Unity Run and encouraged them not to lose their culture, “because if you lose that then you lose your identity…. The only way to keep it strong… [is] you got to live it” (Dean, adult participant, 2011). Josie also shared the same concern and expressed that the identity of our youth is in the “reconnection to the land”:

to see our people back on horseback and our people back on the earth riding and connecting to it… reinserted a strong sense of pride and
honor. [It’s] primordially innate in us, like breathing and walking… the blood memory of our ancestors and what we inherited from them, it was like WOW! This is what my ancestors used to do every day. This is the way of life. I am riding with them, I am running with them, I am walking with them, I am eating with them. It was like we were constantly in contact with them by going through that experience.

(Josie, adult participant, 2011)

The (re)connection to land and identity is of the utmost importance; how we experience that (re)connection can strengthen our core being in terms of how we continue to grasp and take pride in our identity. Taiaiake Alfred (2005) shares a response from one of his interview participants regarding the “connection to land” for Indigenous people, explaining that “The most evident element is that Indigenous peoples have a strong relationship with their land and territories; they see them as the social space where they recreate themselves” (p. 142).

Incidents of racial discrimination against Native people had occurred throughout the Spirit of the Youth Run. In 2005 the youth experienced discrimination near the Haudenosaunee traditional territory and heritage site of the Seneca People, known as Ganondagan, in Victor, New York. Ganondagan was the largest Seneca community in the western doorway of the Haudenosaunee people. It is also a central part of the travels of the Peacemaker. It is here at Ganondagan where the Peacemaker met Jikonsase, a Seneca woman who agreed with the Peacemaker’s proposal in establishing a Confederacy of Nations built upon the doctrine of Peace (Mann, 2004). Jikonsase is also
referred to as the “Mother of Nations” among the Haudenosaunee for her commitment to the Peacemaker and the Great Law of Peace (Mann, 2004). Therefore this place and space was very significant for everyone traveling on the Unity Run. However, all the people who were traveling on the Unity Run in 2005 recognized that in the next few towns they were running through they were going to face overt discrimination based on their identity as Onkwehonwe people. Gusenneeyoh and her mother Garnette discussed feelings of animosity that went through the group as they arrived at Ganondagan. To ensure the safety and protection of the youth, the adult females decided that they would run and walk as they arrived at Ganondagan. It was decided among the participants that the women and the men would go into separate councils (Woman’s Council and the Men’s Council) and discuss how they would move forward running through those areas where discrimination was prevalent, from Canandaigua, New York past Cayuga, New York. Gusenneeyoh speaks about her experience in the Woman’s council:

when we broke into the Women’s Group at Ganondagan we were talking about running from there and not letting the little kids run. The bigger people could run faster and go through that area [because] it was kind of getting scary. [It was decided that we would all] get up early in the morning and somebody was making… medicine for everybody.

(Gusenneeyoh, youth participant, 2011)

The preparation and plan as a women’s group assisted the group as a whole (youth, children and adults) as they continued with their journey through areas where they knew
they were going to be challenged as to who they were, first as Onkwehonwe and also
because of their connection with these traditional homelands where their ancestors once
resided. Any level of racial discrimination has an impact on the psyche and identity of a
person. When an individual is faced with discrimination, the emotions of shock, fear and
anger go through them, and then the questions arise, “Did that really happen?” or “Am I
really seeing that?” This is the reaction the parent of one of the youth had as they went
through and experienced the signs on the lawns of white residents in the town and area of
Cayuga Lake which read “No Sovereign Nation, No Reservation.” Garnette and
Gusenneeyoh (2011) talk about what they saw and felt when they went through this area:

Garnette: When you hear about it, but when you see it… its like,
what’s wrong with these people? I kind of got… it was kind of scary. I
felt like I was in the South with the Black people, because you go into a
town and it’s just white people. It’s a little town and you know they got
all these signs up.

Gusenneeyoh: Yeah, and you got a bunch of Indians running through.

Garnette: There are our kids on the back of a truck, they’re all mixed
but you know they’re all Indians. I was just waiting for some Red Neck
to come by and try to do something. I was more like, what do you call
it? You’re just like looking around and making sure...
Gusenneeyoh: Apprehensive, maybe? (youth participant, 2011)

Garnette: Yeah. Yeah, that’s a good word. But, at the same time you get angry because that’s my land. I don’t care, any of those white people who said, “Why don’t you get over it.” How do you get over it? It’s our history! I don’t know how they get over their stuff. I just can’t. (adult participant, 2011)

Garnette expresses an important point regarding how our identity is tied to our history. For Haudenosaunee and for many Indigenous people, our identity stems from our oral history—how we came to be, which is described in our Creation Story; or (re)tracing the travels of the Peacemaker as he brought the Great Law of Peace (Rice, 2013). The oral history of these stories contributes to our identity as a people and as citizens of the particular nation and clan to which we belong. These stories are directly connected to place and therefore what happens in that place or upon that land is also part of who we are as a people (Rice, 2013). When the youth were at Ganondagan, the women naturally took leadership and decided how the group was to proceed forward in a good way. The land also holds much pain and sorrow, which has been passed down to us as a people. Unfortunately, many Native people throughout history have not had an opportunity to grieve the loss of whole communities. Ganondagan is an example of strength within our history. This site is also a source of resiliency. In 1687 during the Beaver Wars, the French attempted to annihilate the Seneca by destroying their Longhouses and burning their fields (Venables, 2010). There are many areas, including Ganondagan, where our people have been persecuted and massacred for who they were as Onkwehonwe people.
In 2005, the Spirit of the Youth camped in Cayuga Lake. It was discovered that not too far from where they were camped was a place where the Cayuga people once resided known as Gayagaanhe (also spelled as Goi-O-Gouen). Some adults and youth decided to visit that place and discovered a history marker which explained that a Cayuga settlement that once existed where they were standing was destroyed in 1779. The historical marker read: “Cayuga Castle Goi-O-Gouen Site of Principal Cayuga Village Destroyed Sept. 23, 1779 Sullivan Campaign” (Freeman, 2011 fieldnotes). For all who visited this site, it was a painful reminder and a realization of what occurred to our people in the past which has never been taught in schools or documented in history books. It also seemed as though the historical marker placed at this horrific site was like a badge of honour in annihilation of “savages.” It brought forth a tremendous amount of pain and grief for the Native youth and adults who visited that area. Some grief that was felt was an emotional response to the awareness of historical trauma endured by the Haudenosaunee people, while other parts of grief stemmed from the realization of our own losses in identity and cultural knowledge. The experience of discrimination and the realization of historical tragedy within the first year of the Unity Run could have left the youth feeling wounded and defeated, but this was not the spirit of this group.

Phoebe shares an observation from 2007 regarding the external messaging and stress youth experience and how these play an important factor in how youth develop and feel secure with their identity. While (re)connecting to the land is of the utmost importance to identity, the reality the youth were about to experience as they headed to the United Nations in New York City was a different experience, however important:
We were… getting close to New York City, we had our music blaring… kids running with the staffs… signs for peace and unity on our van, going through ghettos… these two girls in particular, they walked out of a store and we were running by… they had to be maybe 16-17 years old… she elbows her friend in the gut and she goes holy F*L%! She then points at us [and says]… “INDIANS”! This girl doesn’t know that we still exist. According to her history book… there are not any left…. When we were getting into the really uppity neighborhoods, we were running into all those nasty people… getting so angry, and swearing…. Our kids were scared, they were upset, they were disappointed, they didn’t receive… congratulatory high five attitudes [as they did in the ghettos]…. So when we got back to the campground that night we had our circle, every kid talked about that…. They had all these stories about being yelled at and screamed at and fingers thrown at them and all of these bad experiences. We just said, “You know what? They are not used to us. They don’t want to see us doing this. Just be protective of each other, remember why you are here and what you are doing.” So, it took 2 to 3 days to get used to that…. [These uppity people] didn’t want to see us at all. It was kind of a conflict for them to deal with… it got to a point where [our youth] didn’t even notice it anymore. It didn’t affect them at all…. It did not pull their minds away anymore…. They knew that what they were doing was the right thing. It was… showing and allowing our kids to
understand, [and] experience actual pride for something that they were
doing that was really good (Phoebe, adult participant, 2011)

The youth experienced a spectrum of extreme behaviours and attitudes which Native
people endure at various levels of mainstream society. This experience was an
opportunity to allow our youth to feel and work through the various levels of oppression
and racism as a collective, though within the framework of the Good Mind and
Haudenosaunee culture. Phoebe expressed that the behaviours and attitudes of others
“did not pull their minds away anymore.” This reminded me of what Sadie Buck told me
in an interview for my Master’s thesis regarding the “sovereign mind” (Freeman, 2005).
Buck expressed that our minds are very powerful, and when we know who we are and
believe with all our being in our Haudenosaunee culture and knowledge, no one can take
or pull that away from us (Freeman, 2005). That is what Phoebe was referring to when
she commented that “their minds didn’t pull away anymore.” The youth collectively
brought their mind, body and spirit together by resolving within their minds that what
was happening to them regarding the hurtful, taunting actions and words of these “white
people” was not a reflection of them, but a manifestation of the “Whiteman’s” world.
Taiaiake (2005) explains that the transformation of identity stems from the “awakening of
indigenous intelligence, a reorientation of mentality, and a reconstruction of the
Onkwehonwe… from a grievance to a cause” (Alfred, 2005, p. 144). Through this
journey, I witnessed the transformative courage and drive of these youth who were
striving to make a difference for their families, communities and their own lives.
The next section explores the notion of well-being (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) and how the Unity Run has 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. However, well-being within Native people’s lives, as well as in other Indigenous cultures, involves so much more. In this section, the youth and adults discuss what well-being means to them and how they experienced or watched others obtain a sense of well-being.

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” (Steph, youth participant, 2011). However some individuals on the Unity Run came on the journey feeling as though 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” (Steph, youth participant, 2011) prior to joining the Unity Run. These youth had been searching for something to fill that “hole.” Unfortunately some turned to drugs, alcohol and other substances (Duran & Duran, 1995; Duran, 2006). Emma, who was brought up traditionally, expressed that the “need” for knowledge and traditional ways of knowing about well-being “was far greater than she could have imagined.” Shelly also 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 “categorized” as a result of their meager living conditions, lack of a cultural connection or as a result of the poor choices they have made. Jon as well as other participants discussed some of the problems and issues Onkwehonwe youth experience within their communities. For instance, some youth possess a “lack of interest” regarding their culture, while other youth are faced with various “societal pressures” in “trying to be something other than who they are,” all contributing to a poor state of well-being among Native youth:

Well, there is definitely a loss of culture. Not a lot of people around here know exactly like what it’s like to be an Onkwehonwe person… the biggest thing I would say would be a lack of interest. A lot of people are growing up in the suburban middle class and there isn’t a lot of interest any more in the old way of life or culture… nobody really cares about it anymore and they figure it’s not a big thing anymore, so why even bother. Just fit into society and you’re good to go, but there’s obviously a lot of problems with that. There’s alcohol—alcoholism around here is really rampant. A lot of youth today are facing these crazy, crazy things which are completely unnecessary. Like on the reserve there’s a rash of suicides, and alcohol and drug related accidents going on. There are a lot of unnecessary things that are happening because people don’t seem to care about themselves anymore. They just want to think living on the reserve is the worst thing in the world. So there’s not much to do but party and whatever else. I think that also
comes from the lack of knowledge about the ceremonies and keeping a
good way, like a good mind set. (Jon, youth participant, 2011)

Most of the youth that were part of the Unity Run saw this journey as a means of social
justice and an action for the inherent rights of Haudenosaunee people, while others saw it
as a way to escape some of the problems or issues they were experiencing. Regardless of
the reason for their participation, the journey was the first opportunity to experience
something other than what they had ever known. It was the first time for many to be
away from the reserve and their family. All who became involved with the Unity Run
knew that it was “something different,” “something positive” which involved a total
immersion in their culture. All participants were told prior to taking part in the Unity
Run that it was a spiritual journey which engaged cultural protocols, praying and the
physicality of running and or walking across our traditional lands and territories.
According to Shelly, “The Unity Run was about being able to show people that you are
not being judged by who you are, but by the choices you make” (Shelly, interview
participant, 2011). Therefore, those youth who wanted to make changes or come to a
realization about their way of thinking or behaviours had an opportunity to make those
changes among their peers while on the journey. For this reason, it was important to have
culturally knowledgeable people such as Elders and supportive adults available for
“guidance and moral support” for anyone within the group. Josie one of the adults and
supporters of the Unity Run expressed the importance of journey to the youth:
[W]hen our youth become connected… it’s just a metamorphosis…
They’re shown something different that their spirit craves, and seeks,
and wants, and when you put it in front of them, they connect to that.
Somewhere along the way somebody told them that, “well you’re
Native but their only connection to that is maybe a band card or a tribal
card.” There’s no content to the statement. When you begin to find
culturally relevant approaches exactly like the Unity Run and Ride, kids
flock to it. They’re sharing an experience with their own peers, and
also being guided by Elders and… knowledge holders saying this is the
way your ancestors used to be. The kids want to belong to something.
They need to identify belonging to something. So, when you’re born
into our community and people say, “Oh you’re Native American?”
But they’re not giving you any examples of it other than an I.D. card, it
really falls short and it’s actually a disappointment because everything
that they learn in school and their images of being a Native American is
absent. So to me, the Unity Ride and Run was a huge part of re-
building and re-claiming those pieces of culture. I just don’t regret for
a single minute the time I took out of my busy life to give that
experience to my children. We still laugh and talk about those stories
and moments, and the different people and the different nations that we
met. It’s timeless. (Josie, adult participant, 2011)
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” (Steph, youth participant, 2011). 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 as a result of being involved in something that had meaning” (Phoebe, adult participant, 2011). 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 and is an opportunity to learn to strengthen the various levels of well-being. 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, 2011)

In Haudenosaunee culture having an understanding of the “big picture” and that “we as human beings are a small part of something bigger” is an important cultural lesson that one can obtain in comprehending our well-being as an individual, family, nation, and as Native people.

This section on well-being began with one youth’s description of it as “a song within us,” and when “it resonate inside us… it’s like we’re lined up inside, it creates a balance and peace” (Steph, youth participant, 2011), which is so true. Unfortunately, not everyone had an opportunity to experience well-being in such a manner. There may have been some youth who participated with the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run who experienced uneasy feelings and emotions in various contexts. One young adult who did not want to be involved with this research shared with me that they had to seek counseling as a result of their participation with the SOY Unity Run. Therefore, I wanted to illustrate how the Unity Run became an opportunity for youth and adults to begin to come to an understanding about their well-being. Some youth were able to obtain a sense
of well-being after one summer on the Unity Run, while for others this experience initiated a process of continuing to learn more about themselves, their culture, language and their well-being.

Steph, who was the youth who spoke about well-being as something that “resonates peace and balance inside us,” explains that knowing “our roles and responsibilities as human beings on this earth,” as well knowing “our history, our teachings and who we are as Onkwehonwe people” contributes to our well-being as Native people. Often times we think of well-being only encompassing the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of an individual. However, as a result of participating on the Unity Run, these youth have realized that their identity as a Native person, as well as the participation and a sense of belonging within their culture, connecting with the land and natural environment, understanding their history (pre and post contact), not only contribute to their well-being as an individual, they also support and contribute to the well-being of the collective —“the people.” Emma highlights the cultural importance in what Steph is discussing:

For us traditionally running is very important. The Unity Run represented what we did…. We ran. People kind of thought we were a little out to lunch for running that far, but we literally ran across our territory. Being on the land and knowing the stories that followed that land, which could have helped a lot of those people if they understood… (Emma, youth participant, 2011)
There were a few youth during the first year of the five-year journey who expressed that the Unity Run could have been more connected to the stories of Haudenosaunee Creation, how our ceremonies came to be, the journey of the Peacemaker and the Great Law. Much of the territory through which the youth travelled during the first three years (2005 to 2007) of the Unity Run were the same trails where significant events occurred that contributed to the social and political evolution of Haudenosaunee as a people, as well as the formulation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Emma continues with her thoughts regarding the first year and the possibilities the Unity Run could have offered to all who were involved if more of our Haudenosaunee history, knowledge and stories were incorporated into the journey:

If they understood the rolling hills, and the reason why it’s called the rolling hills this is where medicine took place and the story took place. It could’ve brought it to life, and it would’ve helped a lot. There were a lot of people who didn’t understand where we were. They didn’t understand… this is a trail where we are going backwards from… the Onondaga Nation or… technically came. That fire was split and brought here [to Six Nations], and we are walking backwards. We should be walking home with pride not shame, stuff should have been explained. That mentality would’ve done a lot to keep their spirits up when they were walking. (Emma, youth participant, 2011)
This is an important point Emma brings to light, the importance of connecting traditional stories to the land and the land to the stories which connect and anchor ourselves to our identity and to our well-being as a people. The “rolling hills” she is referring to are the Onondaga people, “the people of the hills”—the place where the original central fire for the Haudenosaunee resides. Emma speaks about how part of that central fire was brought to the Six Nations of the Grand River in order that the Chiefs, Clan Mothers and our people could continue to maintain our social structures, roles and governance. It is significant in having the Onkwehonwe youth “re-trace” the path back through our traditional territory to our central fire as if it was “medicine” to our people. She identifies that the “mentality” of the youth would have kept their “spirits up” if the youth who were enduring the physicality of the journey were aware of the stories and history of their people as they travelled. She spoke about how our stories and our knowledge add so much more to our well-being and how we carry ourselves in today’s world. As a result of Emma’s suggestions, the youth and Elders who worked in planning the subsequent year’s Unity Run incorporated more of the stories, history and knowledge which connect to the land and areas in which they travelled.

Josie, one of the parents on the Unity Run, explains the significance of re-connecting to the land and to our ancestors which has an emotional impact, as well as a “healing medicine,” for those individuals and families participating:

I think one of the things that were huge was the re-connection to the land and the experience of having to sleep outside, having to cook outside, having to wash and go to the bathroom outside. I thought it
was a return to a natural environment or habitat that was somehow already hard wired in your being and that it was working towards something. You get caught up in the emotions of having a purpose and having an impact not just the group you were with, but in the communities that we rode and ran into. Seeing the wheels of consciousness begin to change. To see that perhaps maybe this way of re-claiming and re-building culture was a step in the right direction to bringing healing to a lot of the traumas that have gone on in the past. It was so much in the doing of it that you get emotional. Somehow what our people have suffered through—colonization has its residual effects on our beings. But somehow it seemed like it was being mended as we ran every step, walked every step and rode every mile. That somehow you were touched by something Greater then you. (Josie, adult participant, 2011)

The Unity Run has touched many people on a deep level whether they expected it or not. Based within the culture of the Lakota and Haudenosaunee, the spirituality and physicality of these Unity Rides and Runs have always worked to assist individuals, families, and nations of people to heal from generations of historical traumas and ongoing traumas. However for the Haudenosaunee youth, the Unity Run has been an opportunity to “come together as a people” with purpose. Brook believes that if anyone were just running with no purpose they would still connect with the land. The Unity Runs were physically, mentally and emotionally demanding: “by having our Elders and our people
on it really makes it a whole lot more, it gives it meaning.” 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 or respect. The youth leader(s), Yvonne spoke to how the youth tried every day to “be ambassadors of the Haudenosaunee” and to “practice the teachings of the Great Law”: “People would come along for the day or five minutes… you always try to put forth that peaceful existence… from the time you wake… to the time you see the stars at night…. You live by those laws of Peace… that was the way we tried to conduct ourselves and parallel it with the history of the Unity Run” (Yvonne, youth leader, 2011). By undertaking such responsibility, the youth began to understand their well-being in relation to the living tenets of Peace and the power of a Good-Mind and the virtue these contribute to all of creation. As Brook discussed the physicality of the Unity Run and the Great Law, Nathan explains that the cultural symbols which represented those Onkwehonwe people who continue to suffer at various levels, do not equate to the physical sacrifice and prayers in which he and other youth runners engaged for their possible hope and salvation:

Peace, Power and Righteousness… goes hand in hand with what we’re trying to accomplish. We had different Staffs that we ran with… representing different causes. We’d had one for battered women… [and] people who were incarcerated… it was awesome to have because you could never forget why you were running. It was in your hand, a constant reminder of why you were doing this… the Righteousness goes hand in hand… you can’t help run miles and miles and miles and
not remember why you are doing it. There is no way you can run and your feet hurt and you don’t want to run no more. But if you know why you are running… you’re going to be at Peace… when you going to bring people’s spirits up, that’s your reason. The Staffs… are so important… it’s a reminder in your hand to what we were doing.

That’s very empowering. I might go through that community [of]… thousands of people… but if I just inspire just one child to change, one teenager to change, one adult to change… Then it’s worth it. (Nathan, youth participant, 2011)

The well-being for the Haudenosaunee being is directly connected to Kaianeren:kowa or the Great Law of Peace and The Good-Mind. Dakota (2011) 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, 2011)

Having journeys such as the Unity Runs is the essence of well-being among Onkwehonwe people. LaFrance & Costello (2010) explains the way in which well-being can be achieved through the Good-Mind:

Goodmindedness stems from using a pure mind in all interactions with the natural world, including other people. Peacefulness flows from being in a state of Goodmindedness, and Strength comes from having Goodmindedness and Peacefulness. Thus a state of Goodmindedness allows a sense of peacefulness to spread across the land, while creating the strength to continue our ceremonies and offer our thanksgiving to the Creator. (LaFrance & Costello, 2010, p. 63)
Well-being also encompasses the “sense of belonging” to our past, present and future. Many years ago when I was a youth of seventeen years old, I had an Elder tell me, “What I do and say today will affect the next seven generations.” It is crucial to understand that we are not alone and that what we do to impact our lives will impact the children of future generations. The connection of cultural knowledge and spirituality was so strong on these Unity Rides and Runs that you never felt alone and you could feel the love of protective forces as healing happened. Josie shared a couple of spiritual experiences which re-affirm the healing that transfers over generations to our ancestors and to those “coming faces” of our future generations.

I remember that moment when the Riders from out West said they would sometimes feel their ancestors riding on horses behind them. On those really brisk mornings where there was still fog they could hear the thundering hoofs of other horses and when they turned there was nobody there, but they felt such a presence. Even when our people burn tobacco for us on that really hard morning when we were running through that racist county in Oneida [New York], and we were coming through Ganondagan where anti-Native Americans claiming lands, our Tobacco burners were seeing our ancestors running behind us—there were hundreds of them. So, to me that impacted a way that we are not only bringing healing to the participants and their issues, but we were somehow bringing healing to our grandparents who never had the chance or opportunity. To me that was really emotional and impacting,
because somehow I felt like my grandparents aren’t here and they died without resolve. But somehow, it was helping them to fix it for them.

(Josie, adult participant, 2011)

Experiences such as these reaffirm our cultural connection on an intellectual, emotional and spiritual level. The Unity Rides and Run were also an opportunity to connect cultural epistemologies to philosophical knowledge in a practical manner with our well-being. For those youth such as Emma, Gusenneeyoh and others, the Unity Run was an opportunity to connect and share their cultural knowledge in the practicality of real-life situations. Gusenneeyoh explains how her experience has contributed to her well-being now into her adult years:

I think at the time I really didn’t realize what we were doing and how it was moving our people… I really don’t think it hit me then, that what we were doing was important. Now, I look back on it and I don’t know if it changed my views because my mum has always raised me Haudenosaunee with the stories. My dad too supplemented that by telling me the stories if she didn’t know them. I think I’ve always had that outlook. But being in a group was a life lesson in how to deal with people when they’re upset or after certain things happen or if we’re discussing something and people were raising their voices. It had more of an impact along those lines in how to be with people, who were not necessarily my best friends and would forgive me if I got mad. So, I
think people skills that came out of that, and just growing up. You know just being able to not let things bother you even if someone did upset you or being able to tell them that that upset me, maybe they didn’t know that upset you. Being able to talk to people like that and let them know that their actions were impacting you too, that was something that came out then. I guess it did kind of motivate me a little bit more, because it was placing emphasis on our culture.

(Gusenneeyoh, youth participant, 2011)

In Haudenosaunee culture, the skills and gifts imparted on individuals are very important and contribute to the well-being of the whole. I have heard people such as Sadie Buck talk about how we celebrate our selves to the Creator through our traditional songs and dance. Garnette remembered the excitement of the Onondaga community as the youth completed the first year of their journey at the Longhouse and remembers seeing an Onondaga woman so thrilled at what the youth were doing in accomplishing the first segment of their journey, and shares this story:

When we arrived in Onondaga, there was a woman there at the end of her driveway; we were going slow because we were behind the runners. She was dancing. Doing E’skanya in her bare feet [and] kicking up the dust in her driveway. I looked at her and put my window down and asked if I could take a picture? “Sure you can,” she answered, “I’m just
so happy, this all I can do for them [is dance]!” (Garnette, adult participant, 2011)

The next chapter will discuss how the findings from this study understands the resiliency, transformations and agency which Native youth are acquiring as a result of reconnecting to their culture and epistemology as an Onkwehonwe person. In addition, this chapter will explore how the experience of the Unity Run journey contributes to the establishment of identity and well-being among Native youth through culture-based activism. The chapter will conclude with the implications and limitations of this research.
Chapter 6: Discussing the Spirit of the Youth

Introduction

The findings from this research are useful in thinking about the capacity of our Indigenous youth when they are provided with an opportunity, a voice and support by Elders and their parents. Through the conversations I had with Native youth, their parents and the adults who supported this spiritual journey, all shared their personal insights, observations and how they were transformed by the experience of the Unity Runs. These perspectives provide a view into the agency and resilience of youth when striving for social justice, cultural resurgence and a connection back to their cultural identity and well-being. Chapters 4 and 5 are centred on the voices of Indigenous youth through the exploration of the following research questions: 1) What are the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs and why do youth engage with such initiatives? 2) How does participating in the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run(s) impact the identity and well-being of Native youth? 3) Are the Unity Runs a form of culture-based activism, and what impact does this type of activism have on Native youth?

The conversations focused on cultural perspectives and stories pertaining to the engagement, agency, and resilience which assisted these youth in completing such an arduous physical, emotional, mental and spiritual journey across the landscape. For most youth who participated with the SOY Unity Run, the journey was a search for solutions and for a better or different way of life, something that would make a positive difference for their families, community, and for them personally. The youth also shared their
insights about the transformative process achieved by connecting to their culture in a unique and active way which provided education, self-awareness and the cultural skills and knowledge that identify them as strong Haudenosaunee people. The youth and their parents/adults also elaborated on the sense of belonging they acquired, the connection to their traditional territories and the natural environment, and on having the time and space to cultivate relationships with their peers and the communities they visited. At the conclusion, the Unity Run journeys were seen by all as a valuable and lasting experience, changing their lives for the better.

The understanding I gained from both the findings and the literature has shaped this chapter in discussing an evolving theoretical model and providing the field of social work with an Indigenous framework to assist and support Native youth in healing and the reviving of their pride and integrity as Indigenous citizens. This theoretical model engages a wholistic and cultural collective perspective which is strength-based. The components of this model include: 1) Indigenous agency and mobilization (caring and helping/involved); 2) Experiential learning (developing skills with cultural practices); 3) Building Relationships (connecting to place, nature and people); and 4) The Journey: healing and transformation (Indigenous spirituality & traditional practices). All components build upon understanding and recognizing Indigenous-based resilience through the interconnectedness of decolonization and Indigenous cultural praxis. The chapter will conclude with my insights regarding the limitations and implications of this model.
Indigenous Theoretical Model

In reviewing what I have learned from the youth, I remembered a diagram I viewed while assisting the SOY leader with planning for the 2011 Unity Run. In one of our planning meetings, the Elder who was assisting and guiding the youth shared the significance of the final SOY Unity journey (gratitude and graciousness for the previous four years of SOY Unity Runs) and of the Dakota Nation territory in which the youth were about to travel. During this conversation, the Elder brought out a sheet of paper with an intricate diagram and began speaking about the spiritual significance of where the youth were to complete their journey at B’dote (St. Paul, Minnesota). The diagram illustrated the spiritual and philosophical knowledge which connected the Dakota people with strength and hope. Unfortunately, the Elder did not offer me a copy. Nonetheless, it was very similar to the image on the 2011 World Peace and Prayer Day poster (see appendix 8), and I wanted to incorporate those important aspects of Indigenous wholistic knowledge with the intersecting relationship Native people have with the earth/land and the spiritual world. Below is the diagram which I have created and expanded from the Elder’s information and the 2011 World Peace & Prayer Day poster:
This illustration represents the interconnectivity of the spiritual and cultural foundations of the Unity Rides and Runs (Hart, 2007). The above diagram provides an understanding of the inner and outer worlds (Ermine, 1995) on both a holistic and collective level, based in the underlying philosophy of the Lakota and Dakota Nations. While this diagram does not represent Haudenosaunee knowledge or understanding, there are similarities between the nations and their philosophies.

In many of the various forms of art and bead work which exist among the Haudenosaunee people, “sky domes” are widely used to represent the spiritual and cosmologic connections and understanding of place-based thought (Watts, 2013). Arthur Parker’s (1912) research on the symbols and sky-domes of the Haudenosaunee are illustrated below:
These symbols consist of two lines at the bottom of the dome, signifying the earth. Inside the dome represents our physical and earthly world, while beyond (outside world) the dome symbolizes the infinite spiritual realm of the Creator and our ancestors. In a few of the images, there is a figure of a plant or tree which is referred to as the celestial tree (Parker, 1912). This figure is important because it reminds the Haudenosaunee of our continued relationship to the spiritual world, as well as our cosmologic beginnings in the Creation story (Watts, 201, Mitchell, 1984). It is also told to us in our teachings that when we hold ceremonies, our ancestors are also holding the same ceremony simultaneously in the spiritual world. The “sky domes” in the second row of Parker’s (1912) illustrations (e – h) also show the figures of the “night sun” (moon) and sun. These symbols are associated with the original teachings presented to the Haudenosaunee.
from the Creator, and the teachings of Peacemaker (Parker, 1912). What is important to remember is that the Haudenosaunee, as well as many other Indigenous nations, have a connection with the spiritual world through the physical and intellectual/consciousness, a relationship with the land and natural environment. This also includes the connection we have to “all our relations” which is confirmed through emotional and spiritual links with our blood memory and heart knowledge as Onkwehonwe (Original Peoples) to this land (Holmes, 2002).

The diagram “The Journey: SOY Unity Ride” represents only a portion of the theoretical understanding I gained from this research. I decided to take the concentric circles at the centre of this diagram and develop them further in explaining the growth, learning and transformation which the Haudenosaunee youth achieved as they journeyed through this act of culture-based activism. In a similar model, Michael Hart (2007) illustrates from his dissertation work with the Cree a “tying together” of the themes which evolved from our research findings and our understanding of the literature. Most importantly, his model represents interconnectedness and the fluidity of what we learn from Indigenous knowledge and the intersections between the physical and the spiritual worlds.

The next page illustrates the theoretical understanding and processes the youth underwent while involved with the SOY Unity Runs.
Indigenous-based resilience theoretical model (Freeman, B., 2013)
Michael Hart (2007) beautifully articulates the importance of indigenous knowledge and the relationship of spirit, ceremonies and the earth and how this is represented in this model:

Its holistic perspective is much larger in that it is intimately linked to matters of spirit. Spiritual ceremonies are seen as significant, if not vital, pathways to gaining, demonstrating, sharing, and/or respecting knowledge. It makes direct and dependent links between knowledge and the earth. It follows, reflects, and relies upon cycles and patterns found throughout the ecosystem and as such incorporates the earth as a primary part of the context. It is multi-generational. While Indigenous knowledge recognizes the fluidity of social actions and developing meanings, it holds strongly onto traditions and set methodologies (such as particular ceremonies), and relies on Elders to pass on the ever developing knowledge from previous generations. (Hart, 2007, p. 87)

In many Native communities, youth peer groups are generating initiatives and socio-political action which incorporate the philosophical forms of Indigenous knowledge, epistemology, axiology, and ontology as a way of promoting healing and social justice for their families and communities (Hart, 2010). When I first started this dissertation journey, one thing the youth stressed to me was that they did not want Native youth to be exhibited as a problem or an issue which needed fixing. The SOY Unity Run was a cultural and spiritual initiative grounding Native youth while garnering and
demonstrating the strength, power and compassion (Indigenous-based resilience) which they inherently possess as young people.

**The Journey**

Journeys such as the West Coast Canoe Journeys (Marshall, 2011), the Cultural Bush Camps (Roué, 2006) and the Unity Rides and Runs re-connect Indigenous people to their ancestral lands, knowledge and culture, heal deep soul wounds (Duran, 2006) and recover a sense of self and well-being. Alfred (2005) explains that nations can rebuild starting at the individual and collective levels:

Disconnection from heritage is the real cultural and physical disempowerment of a person. Health and *healing*, truly, is achieved by rejecting the modern toxic lifestyle; physical and mental healing and cultural reconnection are linked. Physical health is the bodily manifestation of recovered dignity. When clear, calm minds and strong bodies are connected, we have whole persons again, and working together we become strong and dignified nations. (Alfred, 2005, p.165)

Some culture-based programs work for individuals seeking to change on a personal level, such as Culture Bush Camps (Roué, 2006) and Native treatment programs (Dell, 2005; 2008). Other-culture-based initiatives mobilize youth to seek justice for cultural rights and equality, and to protect the earth and natural environments. These forms of culture-
based activism not only influence change on a socio-political level, they have a great impact at the collective and individual levels. The Spirit of the Youth Unity Run carried on the tradition of past Native movements such as Native People’s Caravan (1976), Unity Caravans (1967-1970s), White Roots of Peace (1970s), Occupation at Alcatraz (1976-1978) and the Longest Walk (1978) (Deere, 1978; Harper, 1979; George-Kanentiio, 2008; Gray, 2003; Barreiro, 2010). These journeys sought justice and self-determination for Native people by traveling across the land, providing cultural awareness and education, and unifying Native communities. The goal of these movements focused on the “redevelopment of culture on a human scale [which] is the only practical way that people and peoples can regain control of their lives and destinies…. Native people have called that goal sovereignty… self-determination, and… self-sufficiency” (Barreiro, 2010, p. 199).

Healing journeys such as the Wiping the Tears Ride by the Lakota (1986 -1990) were both spiritual and ceremonial in mending the sacred hoop of their nation, as well as honouring and putting to rest the souls massacred at Wounded Knee in 1890. This journey also helped the survivors and their relatives who carried the grief and pain of generations of assimilation and cultural denial (Duran, 2006; Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995). It is not until these survivors immersed themselves into a cultural collective experience (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003) that they began healing their soul wounds (Duran, 2006) and were able to reconnect to their cultural identity and well-being (Voss et al., 1999; Duran, 2006). In doing so, these survivors “increase[d] their self-understanding and remember[ed] their spiritual essences, [as] they transcend the bondage of oppressions” (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003, pp. 373-374). This reminded me of a quote by Gene Thin Elk,
a Lakota Helper who said “we are not humans on a soul journey. We are nagi, ‘souls,’ who are making a journey through the material world” (originally cited in Goodman, 1992, p. 40; Voss et al., 1999, p. 85).

The Unity Rides and Runs were an extension of the Lakota healing journeys and were a catalyst in returning Native people back to the original teachings of the Creator as understood through their cultural teachings and philosophy. More importantly, these journeys were a collective effort involving youth of all ages, parents and community members in supporting the goals and objectives of this youth group through a journey of decolonization and cultural resurgence. The endeavour to decolonize and transition on a cultural and personal level varied from one individual to another. Alfred (2005) explains the personal process of decolonization:

> the self is the primary and absolute manifestation of injustice and recreating ourselves is the only way we will ever break the cycle of domination and self-destruction it breeds in us and in our communities. Individual decolonization means focusing on the mental, spiritual, and physical aspects of being colonized and living the effect of such a condition. (Alfred, 2005, p. 164)

While I agree with what Alfred (2005) is saying, I would argue that individual decolonizing also involves the social support from likeminded people or a collective. The Spirit of the Youth group provided individuals with the freedom to take risks, make mistakes and to learn from their experience while in the safety and trust of their peer
group, and non-judging adults and Elders. More importantly, the cultural protocols and rules were explained and consented to by each youth to prior to beginning the journey. These rules and cultural protocols ensured the safety and well-being for each individual, as well the safety and well-being of the group/collective. This culture-based journey of activism was so much more than arriving at a pre-determined destination. It could be said that these journeys are modern-day “rites of passage,” (Marshall, 2011) with teachable moments and positive engagement with cultural and sacred knowledge. The cultural practices, the sense of belonging and the relationships that were established along this journey made this a communal or a collective “rite of passage” (Marshall, 2011).

The journey introduced the youth to various ways to decolonize on both an individual and group level, and how to navigate and seek support in living and applying what they had learned on the journey. Tarama Marshall (2011) describes Arnold Van Gennep’s (2004) three stages of “rites of passage” as:

- **Preliminal rites:** rites of separation from a previous world
- **Liminal rites:** rites executed during the transitional (threshold) stage
- **Post-liminal rites:** rites and ceremonies of incorporation into the new world.

(Van Gennep, 2004, p. 21; quoted by Marshall, 2011, p. 79)

It can be said that the SOY Unity Runs reflect the phases of Van Gennep’s (2004) “rites of passage” as youth left their families and communities to embark on their journey from being a “youth” to becoming “young adults” learning how to “be” in the world as Haudenosaunee as they travelled across their traditional territories in a sacred manner.
(Marshall, 2011). It is during the two- to four-week journeys that youth cross the cultural threshold and transform on a wholistic level (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and socially). While the journey represents the beginning of their life journey, many of these young adults continue to carry forward what they have learned from the Unity Runs into their daily lives.

**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; Sonn & Fisher, 1998; Fleming, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 2011). The SOY Unity Runs provided a sense of hope and an experience in recognizing 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).

Kirmayer et al.’s (2011) research project on the Roots of Resilience equates agency and mobilization to the notion of Indigenous-based resilience in highlighting Kahnawake’s reawakening of Kanien’kehá:ka nationalism during the Oka crisis (p. 87). This form of mobilization or culture-based activism stood on the cultural grounds of the Kaianere’kowa (Great Law of Peace) regarding the appropriation of sacred land and the historical injustices endured by the Kanien’kehá:ka, and all Haudenosaunee nations. Kirmayer et al. (2011) stress that:
Culture and language provides resources for resilience, not only for the individual but also for the whole community, the Mohawk Nation, and the Haudenosaunee. For the Mohawks of Kahnawake, responding to challenges has resulted in tenacity, dignity, resourcefulness and hope, and currently directs community efforts to strengthening links with a proud heritage and rebuilding communal institutions based on the values and principles contained with the Creation Story and the Kaianera’kó:wa (The Great Law of Peace). (p. 87)

Fleming & Ledogar (2008) also would support the idea of Indigenous-based resiliency by saying that a strong connection to “cultural identity, participation in traditional activities and spirituality” is important (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008, p. 61). Yet, Heavy Runner & Marshall (2003) contend that Native people gain a sense of resiliency when put into an opportunity that allows for self-exploration and growth. While these authors refer to the idea of cultural resilience in their writings, Tamara Marshall’s (2011) Master thesis on the Coastal Salish Canoe Journey emphasizes both Fleming’s (2008) and Heavy Runner & Marshall’s (2003) conceptualization of Indigenous-based resiliency as it exists as a modern-day rite of passage, encouraging personal growth and transformation for all individuals.

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 were able to awaken a sense of purpose and move beyond the issues and problems they were experiencing in their lives. These youth 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 having 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.

The Interconnectedness of Indigenous-based 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 their
spiritual commitment in 2011. The SOY youth exhibited social agency as they undertook this form of activism based within their Haudenosaunee cultural practices and knowledge.

It was clear that even before the Unity Ride and Run arrived in the community of Six Nations in 2004, this culture-based journey carried powerful potential for spiritual and cultural renewal. The participation with this journey evoked agency not only in youth, but also with Elders and adults who supported the critical praxis youth used to carry forward their youth-led culture-based form of activism. For others, this spiritual journey touched the innate memory which flowed through their heart, soul and blood, thus (re)awakening their desire to be (re)connected with the land, our culture and our people (ancestors, present and future generations).

White & Wyn (1998) explain that the Westernized concept of agency incorporates the reflection and impending action of individuals or groups on a particular issue or matter. Yet for Haudenosaunee people/youth, the notion of Indigenous praxis (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001) as it relates to thought and action is simultaneously reinforced by the entrenchment of Indigenous philosophy, spirituality and epistemology of that particular culture. As I spoke to each participant in this study regarding the motivation to participate with the Spirit of the Youth and the Unity Run, each person expressed their desire to “help.” This notion of helping exists within various Indigenous cultures; the motivation to help may have differed from one person to another, ranging from: a cultural responsibility; to modeling cultural values and behaviours while assisting their peers in discovering their own cultural identity and sense of belonging; to wanting to contribute in taking a stand for social justice regarding the losses and inequalities their communities
and families had endured because they understood that they were a part of the their community.

White & Wyn (1998) also recognize that “agency is a continuous process, involving constant ebbs and flows depending upon immediate material circumstances and group dynamics” (p. 318). The same is partially true for Indigenous agency. Watts (2013) and Trinidad (2009) conceptualize 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 to the earth and creation. This spiritual connection take us to a place deep within ourselves and re-awakens our consciousness to the cosmologic responsibility we have to our Mother the Earth, our natural environment and to the future generations of our people.

The participation of the Spirit of the Youth group during the Elder’s Summit (re)awakened and opened the minds and the consciousness of these youth to set in motion the action towards social justice. This resulted in the creation of the Youth Declaration which proclaimed the youth’s voice and concerns regarding the current state of Native people in North America. This declaration was unlike any ordinary statement. The youth who created this statement also took ownership and referred to it as a living document. They felt empowered to live and stand by what they penned in this document. Many of the original group members of the Spirit of the Youth went on to learn their particular Haudenosaunee language through adult immersion programs, became actively involved with Haudenosaunee culture and Longhouse ceremonies, and advocated for the inclusion
of youth representation and input into community planning and development at Six Nations.

Ladner (2008) refers to the Cree term “Aysaka’paykinit” or “contesting the rope around their nation’s neck,” which best represents the actions and thought processes Native youth strived to achieve with the Youth Declaration and the Unity Run journey. From the start, youth understood that change and action were beginning and would remain with them. By carrying out the Unity Runs and living by this Youth Declaration, these youth were proclaiming that they were “removing the binds” which sometimes hold people back from taking action for Indigenous justice (Ladner, 2008).

White & Wyn (1998) suggest that agency relies on the “constant ebbs and flows [of]... immediate material circumstances and group dynamics” (p. 318). However for those Indigenous youth who did not have a strong foundation with their culture, the “immediate material circumstances,” as well as the “group dynamics” of the SOY Unity Runs provided a supportive and nurturing environment on a wholistic level to teach and provide an experiential adventure in understanding who they were as Onkwehonwe. The Spirit of the Youth ensured that their message in the Youth Declaration was not silenced and that the document that they lived by did not gather dust on a shelf. 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.

The Indigenous praxis (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001) of the Unity Runs was guided by the agency of these youth which stemmed from their cultural (re)connection to
their consciousness, spirituality, and to the place and land of their ancestors (Watts, 2013). 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). As a result, Sky Woman’s consciousness continues to resonate and live within the earth and our beings.

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 within this study explained that as Onkwehonwe people we are not to live our lives in a constant circumstance of crisis or a reactive state. This is not to say that long ago we did not have crisis. There was a time before settlers
arrived in North America that the Haudenosaunee people were in severe crisis due to our disregard for life and disrespect for our original teachings from the Creator. However, this changed with the arrival of the Peacemaker in bringing the Great Law of Peace to the Haudenosaunee people (Mitchell, 1984). The stories of the Peacemaker’s journey remind us to relate to the hardship we once endured and show that we have the ability to overcome any crisis or hardship in our present day lives. Alfred (2005) reminds us that we “begin to live again as Onkwehonwe when we start to embody the values of our cultures in our actions and start to shed the main traits of a colonized person” (p. 165); this is decolonization.

Decolonization may be a process in which Indigenous people are provided an opportunity to “(de)colonize” our minds back to a pre-colonial mindset (Ladner, 2008). However, the context in which Ladner (2008) presents the term “(de)colonization” indicates that while we are attempting to liberate ourselves from the bonds of the colonial empire, we could actually be “re-colonizing” ourselves through the “de-colonizing” process. I do agree with Ladner (2008) that Indigenous movements are grounded and defined by issues of nationhood and decolonization. However, I believe we should use caution in how we choose to decolonize. We may be caught by the strategies and discourses through which the political and social forces of the dominant society attempt to reconcile their colonial and oppressive practices by tugging at the heart of our emotions and experiences. This is not an authentic form of decolonization. This attempt only encourages and supports the continued underlying colonial mentality which is so embedded within the social fabric of our lives. Indigenous people may choose to decolonize through the culture and tradition of the people, which is ideal. However, if we
choose to decolonize in this manner we have to be aware that this is a process and at times we may unconsciously revert to our colonized mindset and behaviours to justify our actions, values, and beliefs. The youth shared how various individuals have manipulated and re-colonized aspects of Indigenous knowledge and structures to suit their own agendas, such as forming gender-based groups based on the conceptualization of Haudenosaunee culture as well as forming groups “in the name” of Haudenosaunee culture. This diminishes the importance and role which the clan system, Chiefs and Clan Mothers, and our collective kinship play within our traditional cultural structures. The youth explained that if we begin to reformulate Indigenous knowledge for various agendas without considering the underlying purpose or epistemology of our cultural knowledge, then we are colonizing our system of knowledge which has sustained our sovereignty and nationhood for generations.

Writers like Ladner (2008) and Long (1992) indicate that Native social movements have centred their goals and actions toward the truth and justice of Indigenous nationhood / sovereignty, environmental protectionism, treaties and inherent rights, and rightful history. Therefore, it is imperative to say that decolonization within Indigenous social movements alters and expands the consciousness of its participants, and attempts to shift the consciousness and behaviours of those bystanders to the cultural truth and justice of Indigenous peoples. Alfred (2005) discusses the form of discovering truth and justice as an intent of decolonization:

Decolonization… is a process of discovering the truth in a world created out of lies. It is thinking through what we think we know to what is
actually true but is obscured by knowledge derived from our experiences as colonized people. The truth is the main struggle, and the struggle is manifest mainly inside our heads. From there, it goes to our families and our communities and reverberates outward into the larger society, beginning to shape our relationship with it. In a colonized reality, our struggle is with all existing forms of political power, and to this fight, we bring our only real weapon: the power of truth. (Alfred, 2005, p. 280)

Not only is the power of truth significant within Indigenous movements and struggles, Alfred (2005) indicates that “true revolution is spiritual at its core” (Alfred, 2005, p. 22). Therefore, while some may argue that Indigenous people’s movements have not really made significant changes in policies or in how society views Indigenous people, others would argue that the revolution of Indigenous people has been in the practicing of ceremonies, maintaining socio-political structures and governance, and taking refuge in the mountains and forests to secretly maintain their cultural knowledge and language for many generations (Ladner, 2008).

The Unity Rides and Runs are an Indigenous form of revolution (Memmi, 1991) and resurgence (Alfred, 2005), and are arguably a form of decolonization (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012) and healing. As Alfred (2005) and Stubben (2006) have expressed, Native activism is both spiritual and political, yet our indigeneity and our authenticity is our personal quality that sets Indigenous movements apart from other movements (Alfred, 2005). Hence, the SOY Unity Runs have brought Native communities together through culture-based healing and action. These journeys have
allowed us 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.

To define the notion of culture-based activism through this study, it has been expressed as a spiritual and political action based in cultural knowledge, practices and epistemology while raising the consciousness of ourselves and the general population regarding the inherent and cultural rights of Indigenous people as the original occupants of North America. Culture-based activism is a form of decolonization in which we are involved in the Indigenous praxis of critically reflecting on our history, knowledge, politics, economics and socio-political structures and acting in the form of social justice based on those critical reflections (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001). Indigenous critical praxis is also the practice of 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 are a form of decolonization in providing youth and adults with a new awareness and a greater level of cultural consciousness (Duran, 2008) regarding their humility and actions by undertaking roles and responsibilities to their respective nation, as well to the natural world.
The Transformation of Cultural Identity and Well-being

The original Unity Rides and Runs were a spiritual form of collective healing, unifying and liberating Native communities and nations from the historical atrocities and present-day traumas which disempowered individuals, families and communities. These journeys empowered families and individuals to travel across their traditional territories on foot and/or by horseback to bring hope and dignity back to the people of their nation. While these journeys were based on the collective, they had a powerful internal impact on the individual (Morgan, 2010). The Unity Rides and Runs slow a person down to allow one to reflect on their life, the history of their people and what they can do to make changes in their lives and for the future (Morgan, 2010).

O’Brien’s (2007) research with the Seri and Tohono O’odham Indians and their journey by foot from El Desemboque, Mexico to Tucson, Arizona to raise awareness of diabetes among Indigenous populations, broadens the understanding of human agency as it is linked to the collective act of self-determination. Through this journey the physical challenge of walking was influenced and connected to the participant’s consciousness. O’Brien’s (2007) research reminded me of the findings in my study and how the SOY participants expressed that they wanted to be involved with something larger than themselves and to see the opportunity of social justice for their people. As one youth eloquently stated, “nay:ne wha ne:kora—in our minds is the power.” As the SOY youth participate in the physicality of connecting to the land, they begin to connect their minds and consciousness to the epistemology of their inner and outer worlds based within their cultural frame of knowledge and practice (Ermine, 1995), resulting in a positive influence.
on their well-being. Adelson (2002) describes this Indigenous perspective of well-being as “miyupimaatisiun” (Cree) or “being alive well.” The youth who participated with the Unity Run had every aspect of their well-being affected by the experience of the journey. In many instances, this was the first time for many youth (as well for the adults) to truly experience what it meant to “being alive well” from a Haudenosaunee perspective. The youth leaders, Elders and those who possessed the cultural knowledge supported these youth and adults as they were challenged physically (walking, running, traveling, camping), emotionally (leaving family, friends and community, traveling, establishing new friendships, dismantling preconceived notions of being Native, experiencing racism from the general public), mentally (learning about culture, and values, Haudenosaunee history of the Peacemaker and the Great Law of Peace), and spiritually (participating in ceremony and traditional practices, behaving according to cultural and spiritual protocols) throughout the journey.

The Indigenous perspective of well-being not only encompasses the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual well-being of an individual, it also includes the wholistic well-being of the family, community and/or group with which the individual connects and identifies (Mussell, Cardiff & White, 2004). Mussell, Cardiff and White (2004) conceptualize this Indigenous notion of well-being as “optimal,” where families and communities (collectives) possess and model strong cultural values and beliefs and demonstrate knowledge of the land, natural environment and cultural history—all this contributes to the sense of belonging and self-esteem of the individual. The youth who participated on the Unity Run expressed the importance of being a part of something, and having a sense of belonging with unconditional acceptance by the group. This positively
impacted on how these youth viewed themselves, worked with others and contributed back, ensuring the well-being of the group was maintained. This is not to say that the Spirit of the Youth did not experience challenges as a group. When they did experience such challenges, it was the cultural knowledge which they turned to. For example, the youth implemented aspects of the clan system to ensure that one person or a group of people were not overwhelmed with the burden of work. If a youth did not have a clan for one reason or another, a clan would be assigned to that individual. When behavioral and/or substance abuse issues arose among individuals, the group as a whole would hold a talking circle and decide as a collective on how to proceed in dealing with the issue. I believe such challenges strengthened not only the group, but also provided individuals with skills and knowledge they took with them after the journey was completed.

“Being alive well” also contributes to one’s understanding of his or her cultural identity, relationship with land, and social-political responsibility within their community. The SOY Unity Runs offered youth and young adults the opportunity to “be Haudenosaunee” (Adelson, 2002) without the judgment or criticism they may have endured within their own communities. It provided youth with a sense of liberation and freedom, within the framework of cultural responsibility. The youth summed this up as saying this experience resonated as a “song within them and that everything is lined up to create balance and peace” (Steph, 2011). Being immersed in the natural environment and in their traditional territories created “an association with success and strength in people’s minds to reconvince them that they have worth, deserve to be happy, and have their rights respected” (Alfred, 2005, p. 164).
The question of identity for youth is not so much the individuality or distinctiveness of a person. Those individuals who were not socialized in the cultural environment of the Longhouse expressed that they felt as if they were on a journey seeking to (re)connect to their soul and to their Native culture and identity (Duran, 2006; Berry, 1999). However, the Unity Run journeys were not only to (re)connect to culture and identity they were a form of understanding what it meant to “be… alive well.” (Adelson, 2002) The Unity Runs connected youth to the stories of Creation, to their cultural history (pre-contact, Peacemaker) and encouraged them to appreciate the land and territory in which their ancestors once lived. These Unity Runs created a sense of belonging (nation/clan/family) and support through the means of the collective. The experience also aided youth in establishing lifelong friendships and acquaintances among their peers and with supportive adults from various communities. This study highlighted the significance of cultural experience to Native identity. Adelson (2002) expresses from an Indigenous perspective what “being Cree” means. The same sentiment can also be expressed as to what “being Haudenosaunee” or “being Anishnaabe” means. Being who we are as Indigenous people (the cultural connection to history, cosmology, natural laws, etc.) is a significant part of our identity as an Onkwehonwe person and our citizenship of our particular nation. Indigenous identity and citizenship stems from our relationships, responsibilities, as well as from the association we have with the land and place, our language and ceremonies. Cultural identity unifies and integrates the cultural standards through which individuals gain a sense of belonging to a people (Mihesuah, 1998).

The collective sphere of this theoretical model encompasses the heart of cultural resilience which Native people discovered when they were spiritually connected through
ceremonial journey. These journeys provided an opportunity for Native youth to heal, decolonize and discover as a collective the agency and mobilization which they possess through culture-based activism. It is also through journeys and ceremonies such as these that the group and its members slow its pace to the rhythm of the earth and the natural surroundings to gain a level of cultural consciousness and reflection. It is through this self-reflection that Native youth were provided an opportunity to experientially learn and grow wholistically with the guidance of Elders, peers and supportive adults. These youth learned cultural knowledge, values and skills which will transcend beyond their experience with the SOY Unity Run, and into their adult lives.

Implication of this theoretical model

The Unity Rides and Runs were initially conceived as and continue to be a spiritual and physical healing journey for Native families and communities to recover from the generations of cultural trauma, colonization and genocide. Cultural practices such as these are significant and central to restoring the balance and well-being of Native people’s lives. Therefore, I felt it was important to focus on the philosophical, epistemological and ontological understandings and meanings which these spiritual journeys convey on a wholistic level. However, a limitation of this theoretical model is that it is based on a four-year ceremony which has been passed from one nation to another through a Council of Elders. This led me to think, how could this research contribute to the needs, voices and the positive development of Native youth in our communities? This question led me to discover a positive theoretical approach which
focused on the physical, cognitive, emotional, moral and social development of young people as they proceed into adulthood, known as “positive youth development” (Larson, 2000; Lewis-Charp et al., 2006; Kenyon & Hanson, 2012). I felt that this theoretical approach, along with the cultural knowledge of Native communities could be a foundational model for practice with Native youth programs and communities.

Kenyon & Hanson (2012), as well as Trinidad (2009; 2011) suggest that the principles of positive youth development theory, from an Indigenous perspective, would be comprised of Native culture, history and experiential learning as the bases of a theoretical model. The framework would also include: spirituality and cultural healing; strengthening cultural identity, well-being and competence; building relationships; and the caring for and contribution to the collective.

As I developed my theoretical model of Indigenous-based resilience, I considered the cultural knowledge and the conceptual perspectives which evolved from a framework of Indigenous knowledge, as well as the literature and the findings from this research. I wanted this theoretical model to stand as a framework for future Indigenous social work practice and program development with Native youth across Indigenous and other cultures. The process of coming to resilience is a wholistic process which involves a journey of learning, transformation, connecting and reciprocating back to our Indigenous communities. Indigenous-based resilience is a process of praxis—thinking and connecting on a conscious level to our Indigenous knowledge and epistemology by means of action through the process of decolonization. This model and its process is not rigid or stagnant; it is always moving, changing and growing—as it has a life of its own.
In the final chapter I will be discussing what I have learned and how this research will contribute to the field of social work. I will also be discussing the limitations and implications of this research, and will wrap up the chapter with my conclusion.
Chapter 7: Concluding thoughts: Reclaiming, Decolonizing and Indigenizing Social Work

What I have learned:

In the field of social work, scholars, researchers and practitioners are becoming more aware of the underlying entrenchment of imperialism and colonialism in how we view and interact with our practice, research, and education (Hart, 2010). Scholars such as Raven Sinclair et al. (2010), Kathy Absolon (2011), Michael Hart (2010), Cyndy Baskin (2011), Linda Smith (1999), Lawlor W. “Bill” Lee (1992), Taiaiake Alfred (2005), Lynn Lynn Davis (2010) and others have challenged our thinking regarding the notion of colonization and how it reinforces and shapes what we “become” and how we “conduct ourselves” through the work we do. This awareness brings to light the underlying colonial mentality within social work which contributes to and sustains the dominant discourse and ideology that continues to perpetuate the oppression and marginalization of the people we are “helping.” It is through the work of the above scholars that the scope of social work is being widened to demonstrate that Indigenous knowledge and epistemology has much to offer not only to social work, but to the academy as a whole (Briskman, 2010; Hart, 2010; Baskin, 2011).

The research I conducted with the Haudenosaunee youth and their journey with the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run has taught me the importance of thinking and acting outside the parameters of social work and research. In addition, this research study brought me down from the “ivory tower” and literately put me out on the land, providing me with an experiential understanding of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges.
vital to the survival and resilience of the Onkwehonwe and all that is living on this earth. My experience showed me that it was important to establish research within an Indigenous-centered paradigm to maintain the integrity of Indigenous people and their knowledge. The values, beliefs, and actions which guided the youth in reclaiming their identity and well-being through this culture-based form of activism, demonstrated to me and my work that the youth possess an understanding and concern for their future. I felt that if I applied a Western, Eurocentric theoretical framework and methodology to this Indigenous-focused research, I would be shutting down the voices of the youth and reinterpreting through a colonial mindset the knowledge and resilience they shared with me. For that reason, I did not want to (re)colonize and marginalize this valuable knowledge which continues to sustain Indigenous and Haudenosaunee people over generations. It is imperative for me that this research and dissertation be framed in the cultural philosophy and values of the Haudenosaunee, so that future researchers, practitioners, educators and students know how much Indigenous knowledge has to contribute overall.

This chapter discusses the wider implications and limitations of my research as well as the importance of reclaiming Indigenous knowledges and practices and decolonizing and indigenizing the field of social work. The final section of this chapter will conclude the dissertation and present my thoughts for future research.
(Re) Claiming Indigenous Knowledge in the Practice of Social Work

I reflect on our history as Indigenous people and I am humbled. Many Native individuals, families and communities have risked their lives to protect and ensure that our philosophical and cultural understanding of the world, our languages, and our ceremonial practices continue to exist as they were originally passed down from one generation to the next (Battiste, 2000). Many of our grandparents and relatives endured countless numbers of atrocities affecting their bodies, minds, and spirits perpetrated by the colonizers in an attempt to rid society of the “Indian problem” (Borrows, 2010). The youth in my research remind us that we are still here as Indigenous peoples and that we are not to define ourselves through our problems and issues, but to re-claim the culture our ancestors have left us by our “ways of being.” Raven Sinclair (2010) and Gail Baikie (2010) eloquently speak to bridging social work’s past conceptualization and actions of “helping” based within an Eurocentric perspective to present and future “formulations of an Indigenous-centred social work” (Sinclair, 2010, p. 23). This work would involve “culturally relevant” theories, epistemologies and practices based within Indigenous knowledge and culture (Sinclair, 2010). Sinclair (2010) adds that the field of social work also needs to decolonize how we think, act and view the work we do to ensure that the practice and pedagogy of Indigenous knowing, being and doing is not lost in the translation. One implication of this research is to reinforce Sinclair’s point of view. By centering Indigenous knowledge throughout the research and relationship-building process, we ensure the integrity of the system of Indigenous knowledge and the people and communities we become engaged with. This notion of Indigenous integrity has
become an overarching goal for me while completing my dissertation. I have gained valuable insight into the implications and limitations of my research which I feel will contribute to the field of social work.

This brings to mind a gathering that the youth and I attended prior to beginning our 2011 journey with the Unity Run. This experience highlighted for me the importance of relationship building and maintaining the integrity of Indigenous knowledge and practices within Native communities. It was suggested by the SOY Elder that we attend the “Pow Wow on the Plateau” (May 21-22, 2011) held at the Cumberland County Fairgrounds in Crossville, Tennessee to inform this Native community of the Unity Run in a public/social forum, as well to recruit more participants. Pow Wow gatherings for Native people have always been very important social events in coming together to reunite with relatives and old friends, and to meet new people. During these gatherings we re-establish our relationships through singing, feasting, dancing, and sharing news and stories from our families and communities (near and far). One event during the Pow Wow on the Plateau which I had never previously experienced during my travels to Native communities was what this community referred to as the “Trade Blanket” social event. I have outlined the experience below in an excerpt from my field notes from the evening of May 22, 2011:

“Trade Blanket”

The Pow Wow committee invited all the Unity Runners to join them at their feast and to participate in their annual “Trade Blanket” evening
social activity. They explained to us that this annual event went back many generations for their people.

That evening, I went to the pavilion and joined the community who were already engaged in their “Trade Blanket” activity. As I quietly observed, I found this event quite interesting. Approximately 30 people (men, women and children) were sitting around a 10 ft by 10 ft blanket lying on the ground. Each person who wanted to trade would tell a story about the item they were about to set on the trade blanket. After all the stories were shared about the items placed on the blanket, those who were interested would step up to the blanket for a closer look and then go back to their possessions to decide what they would trade for that item. When an observer decided they wanted to trade, they would present the trader/storyteller with their trade item. If the trader/storyteller was happy with the trade offer, they would pick up their item from the trade blanket and make the exchange. However, if the storyteller was not satisfied with the offer, they would decline by shaking their head or saying “no trade.” The organizer or host of the ‘Trade Blanket’ would decide how long a trading session would take place before closing one and beginning a new trading and storytelling session.

I remember an older woman who arrived late at the “Trade Blanket” event. She presented to the audience a piece of wood approximately 4 to 5 inches long (looked like a twig). She began
walking around the trade blanket showing the audience this wooden object and telling such an engaging story it encapsulated everyone’s attention. Interestingly, this older woman did not refer to the item as a twig or stick, but named it in her language. The woman shared how her great grandmother would use this important utensil to pack her pipe with tobacco for ceremony, and that this item was sacred and powerful. As I looked around the audience she had everyone’s attention, she even had me believing the power and sacredness of this wooden utensil. Later that evening when I saw the woman, I asked if that trade item was really her great grandmother’s... she just looked at me with her dark brown eyes and smiled.

Some people may imply the woman’s story is a contrived story about a “stick/twig”. While others would say it’s not so much about the materialistic items presented on the “Trade Blanket,” but how this activity brings together a community through sharing items, stories, laughter while building relationships. What was most important was the demonstration and art of storytelling.

The “Trade Blanket” experience was really important for me to engage in and understand from an Indigenous perspective. The integrity and skill of our Native Elders and communities continues to establish and maintain the collectivity of the people. From the viewpoint of an Indigenous researcher and scholar, the academy has a tendency to support independent thinking with the construction of abstract ideas, imposing those
abstract notions and thoughts back on to our communities. As I sat with the Native community in their “Trade Blanket” social, I was not there totally as a Native person. In the back of my mind, I was on this journey as a doctoral candidate observing and conducting research, therefore imposing my Eurocentric education and views onto the community and the woman’s story. When I reflect back on the theoretical perspectives of the Two-Row Wampum, I continually see myself struggling back and forth attempting to “fit” in one world or the other (Western or Onkwehonwe) and not feeling comfortable in either. In the Western world, I want to legitimize Indigenous knowledge as a reputable source of knowledge. In my Onkwehonwe world, I want to bring what I have learned in the Western world and contribute back to my community. In understanding the notion of the Two-Row Wampum, I have to choose to settle in one world or the other. I cannot straddle with one foot in each world. This experience with the old Native woman and the trade blanket provided me with an understanding and a responsibility to both worlds. Debbie H. Martin (2012) conceptualizes this notion of “two-eyed seeing.” I am using who I am as a Native person with the knowledge and understanding from my Indigenous worldview as one lens (Kanuha, 2000). However, what may not be evident to my Native community at times (until I say or act upon something) is how I am seeing and thinking through the lens of my Western, Eurocentric education and training (Martin, 2012). For some Native researchers this Western, Eurocentric lens may present a limitation depending on the context or role in which they are participating within their communities. As I critically reflected on my experience through my Indigenous lens, I found this second lens to be a limitation. This limitation might stem from the lack of culturally relevant research and literature in the area of social work and Haudenosaunee people.
Nonetheless, it’s important for Indigenous scholars and researchers to understand that they may possess “two-eyed seeing” (Martin, 2012); that, their actions or the way in which they view a Native community may influence or have an impact on their research, practice and relationships within their community (Kanuha, 2000).

As Native people, we experience various levels of colonial impact which blur, distort or totally blind our seeing and understanding of the world from an Indigenous perspective. However by (re)claiming our Indigenous knowledge and practices, we reawaken this source of knowledge and understanding reconnecting us to our truth and integrity as Indigenous peoples. I have come to understand that I must decolonize my thinking to truly understand the philosophies and cultural knowledge which ground the actions and worldviews of Indigenous peoples. In the next section, I will discuss the importance of decolonizing social work research, practice and education as we work with Indigenous peoples.

**Decolonizing Social Work: Limitations and Implications**

In the literature review and my analysis of this research, I discuss the notion of decolonizing. Decolonizing is the attempt to acknowledge and overcome the colonial and the imperialist influences dominating our lives as Indigenous people. The Unity Rides and Runs have been a way of healing historical trauma and a way of decolonizing for those Indigenous communities participating. These journeys provided participants with an opportunity to liberate themselves from the colonial binds (internally and externally) which attempted to define and marginalize, and erase our peoples from their
lands and territories. They have offered a chance to (re)claim our indigeneity and sovereignty. How can we as researchers, practitioners and educators decolonize our thinking and practices as they relate to Indigenous knowledge and spirituality in the field of social work?

What I have learned is that these spiritual journeys are a decolonizing approach immersing Native people in culture and traditional practices and challenging our ideas and perspectives that have been influenced and altered by colonization. They bring us back to an Indigenous way of behaving and thinking—which I like to call “thinking in Indian” (Barreiro, 2010). I have come to understand that these journeys challenge our learning on both a personal and professional level. They challenge us to come to understand ourselves better on various levels (physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and socially) with all our relations. These journeys have taught me to think beyond the Eurocentric parameters and perspectives of social work to how we as Indigenous peoples have incorporated ways of helping and co-existing with one another and the natural environment, as intended by the Creator. Judy Iseke (2013) expresses that “spirituality and decolonization are inextricably linked” (p. 36) through Indigenous epistemology, knowledge, cosmology and practices, thereby providing an encompassing connection for individuals and groups to a sense of place and belonging. When one is involved with ceremony, “one is no longer a colonial subject, or even a resistor to colonization. One becomes spirit and one with Creator, and one’s understanding of life are shifted. This undoing of the colonial by the act of ceremony is a decolonizing act” (Iseke, 2013, p. 48).
Some may view the lack of examining or explaining a cultural practice or ceremony as a limitation. I feel that it is imperative as practitioners, educators and researchers that we leave the sacredness of these knowledges and practices to those who carry the teachings. This is not to say that there cannot be a philosophical understanding of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology as part of decolonizing social work research, practice or education. Spirituality, prayers and coincidences have been the basis of understanding and guidance with this (re)search. In many cases, Indigenous spirituality has connected truth and reality on a profoundly deep level while upholding the integrity of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology, and ensuring the voices of the youth were central to this work. In the same sense, I feel that my voice and narrative as an Indigenous woman has been reflected through my standpoint and understanding of this cultural youth experience as a way of decolonizing social work research and practice.

On a practical level regarding social work, I have experienced and viewed the Unity Rides and Runs as powerful decolonizing approaches bringing Indigenous people, families and communities back to the roots of who they are as Onkwehonwe. Yet, I believe that many conservative social workers would view and question such journeys as a limitation to practice. I argue that social work practice and education need to broaden its perspectives and approaches in the way we educate and work with people. Journeys such as Walks, Canoe journeys, and Unity Rides and Runs present the field of social work with valuable knowledge and experience which is centuries old. As Mel Gray et al. write, “Indigenous social work is not about cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, cultural competence or cross-cultural practice; it is about community connections” (Gray et al., 2013, p. 10). For social workers to become culturally grounded as practitioners, it
is important to learn and understand the following: Indigenous ways of helping, spirituality and ceremonies; cultural beliefs and values; Indigenous perspective of their history; the importance of collectivity, land and place; and that Indigenous stories and cosmologies are not myths or fables. While most schools of social work may offer Aboriginal courses as electives, this is not enough for social work students or practitioners to say they have the ability to work with Indigenous communities. I applaud those allied colleagues who genuinely make an effort to incorporate Indigenous perspectives within their courses, thus furthering decolonization in offering students their understanding and experiences as an ally. Yet I am intrigued by those programs that offer Indigenous experience and learning through the involvement and guidance of Elders as core to their pedagogy. I would like to put forth as an implication of this research that social practice and education involve more experiential learning regarding Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies, and that more Indigenous scholars and Elders be hired within academic and social service institutions as a decolonizing practice. Doing so would ensure that the needs of our people are met and that the people working with Indigenous individuals, families and communities have the cultural support and guidance to connect with community.

This research has been a decolonizing project in understanding Native youth and the important contributions they provide to their communities. Something I found lacking in existing literature and research was the positive support and development of Native youth achieved through cultural journeys or experiences on the land. The existing literature seemed to objectify Native youth to their issues and problems, focusing on the implementation of some type of measure and reporting on that progress (Bennett et al.,
2003; Best, 2007). I did find a number of studies and articles which respected and incorporated a cultural understanding in using Native practices with youth. What I found missing were the positive and rich introspections offered by Native youth regarding their experience which were offered in this research. Therefore, I would like to propose that future research include the voices and introspection of Native youth throughout the research project. Doing so will demonstrate respect and establish trust with and among youth.

**Indigenizing Social Work: Limitations and Implications**

In a presentation on “Decolonizing the Academy” by Tuscarora and Six Nations Historian, Richard Hill (McMaster University, January 23, 2014), I was reminded that if we are going to “indigenize the academy” it will require more than just “putting beads and feathers on a horse. No matter how much we window dress it, we’ll still have a horse” (Hill, 2014). I think this is true for the field of social work. If we are truly interested in “indigenizing” the field of social work, we as scholars, researchers and practitioners have a responsibility to incorporate authentic forms of Indigenous knowledge, philosophy and epistemology as they relate to our local Indigenous communities. I believe it is also important for us to expand our thinking beyond the parameters of social work to engage with Elders, culture carriers and communities regarding cultural philosophies, knowledge, collective values and traditional practices. Doing so may challenge the colonial mind and imperial boundaries. Yet, I feel it is
important to respect the sacred knowledge, cosmology and spiritual forces which are central to the reality and ontology of Indigenous peoples.

This leads to my next question, how can we indigenize the field of social work? Michael Hart (2010) refers to Eva Marie Garrouette’s (2003) notion of “Radical Indigenism” as an approach in his chapter “Critical Reflections on an Aboriginal Approach to Helping.” It requires scholars to stop reading and studying about Indigenous philosophies and to engage with an “Indigenous way of life” to truly understand it. Therefore, “Radical Indigenism” …requires the abandonment of any notion of the superiority of dominant academic philosophies, interpretations and approaches based on them. It requires that scholars accept tribal philosophies as containing ‘articulateable’ rationalities and that they give themselves to these philosophies so that they can look through the lens of traditional ways of knowing. To develop such a view requires a level of devotion, commitment and intellectual flexibility in which scholars do not just read or think about these philosophies; instead they trust them, practice them, and live within them. (Hart, 2010, p. 138)

While I agree with Garrouette’s (2003) notion of Radical Indigenism, I believe it may be easier for some more than others to actually integrate this notion into their work. As an Indigenous scholar and researcher attempting to incorporate a wholistic perspective into research by means of a spiritual journey and attempting to understand Indigenous practices and knowledge without exploiting, appropriating or imposing another
worldview, I have found it requires a constant struggle. Also, I feel it is very important that anyone conducting research or working with Native communities build trust and establish relationships with the people they will be working alongside (Kanuha, 2000; Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). I have to admit that having participated in a number of spiritual rides and runs, I thought it would be easy for me to undertake the role as a researcher on the journey with the Spirit of the Youth. Yet I found this experience the most challenging, on a personal and professional level. I know the importance and sacredness this journey represented to me and its participants. However, with the importance of centering and grounding this research and dissertation within the worldview of the Haudenosaunee, I was torn by two responsibilities: 1. Being an Indigenous woman; and 2. Establishing myself as academic.

As an Indigenous researcher undertaking this study, I first viewed myself as a researcher with a role and a job to complete during the SOY Unity Run. However, when the youth and the journey participants requested that I put aside my “job as a researcher” and participate as part of the collective, I really struggled (Kanuha, 2000; Brayboy & Deyle, 2000). It was not until recently that I began to understand what really happened during the 2011 SOY Unity Run. As an Indigenous mother and woman, my first responsibility was to these youth and ensuring their safety and basic needs were met while working as part of a collective on this journey. When I reflect on how I viewed things during this journey, I realize that I was not participating as an Indigenous woman and mother as I had done on previous Unity Rides and Runs (1995-1996; 2003-2004; 2005 & 2007). This time I was attempting to use the SOY Unity Run journey as a way of establishing myself as an academic and scholar attempting to complete a PhD. This is
not to say that what I did was wrong or that the two positions (Indigenous woman and western researcher) cannot coincide. What I realized now is that I possessed this perspective of “two-eyed seeing,” while partially shielding my Indigenous perspective/lens in establishing myself as an academic and researcher. The struggle in trying to separate myself as a researcher and academic left me with an abundance of self-doubt regarding my confidence and skills. Therefore, I continually questioned if I should be on this journey or even doing my dissertation research with the Spirit of the Youth and Unity Run.

The two perspectives of seeing the world through “two-eyed seeing” (Martin, 2012) and “Radical Indigenism” (Garrouste, 2003) seem to be contrasting positions. Yet these two views have assisted me in critically analyzing and understanding how my position with the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run was not to conduct myself as a “researcher,” but to totally experience the responsibility of being an Indigenous woman, mother and auntie immersed within a cultural and spiritual journey (Wilson, 2013) and how experiencing this is also re-searching. As Shawn Wilson writes, “Indigenous research works from a worldview in which knowledge is relational: Indigenous people are not in relationships, they are relationships. This is Indigenous truth and reality” (Wilson, 2013). Nonetheless, understanding and conveying this Indigenous truth and reality within the context of research and practice, and in an educational environment, can be challenging and yet liberating.

An implication that I see from this research is that those Indigenous scholars, researchers, practitioners and educators who possess and negotiate the perspective of “two-eyed seeing” (Martin, 2012) within their work need to understand that we will be
viewed first and foremost as community members with expectations and responsibilities defined by our culture (Wilson, 2013). Therefore, we must undertake the burden of how we present ourselves within our communities through our various roles (Indigenous woman and mother, community member verses researcher, scholar, social worker, etc.) and understand that we may have to close or squint through the Eurocentric Western lens of our “two-eyed seeing” (Martin, 2012) in order to immerse ourselves fully into our worldview (Garroutte, 2003). This will allow us to maintain a level of devotion with Indigenous communities and peoples, not for the purpose of research or Western education, but for the importance of relationship (Wilson, 2013) and our responsibilities defined by the culture and our communities.

The ability of “two-eyed seeing” can be a benefit to me as an Indigenous researcher, scholar and educator by allowing me to evaluate and analyze theoretical approaches and decide if they would be appropriate in working with Native populations. My involvement with the SOY Unity Runs have provided me with an experience in understanding what Indigenous social work is through exploring the philosophical underpinning of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology which exists within Native communities. By having this opportunity to contribute and support the SOY Unity Runs, I was able to learn about myself. This was significant in understanding the importance of Indigenous helping as it is grounded in our cultural values, beliefs and ethics/protocols as Haudenosaunee people. I was able to observe youth as a group in the process of understanding and working through how Haudenosaunee cultural systems work. One example was involving the clan system. The Spirit of the Youth used this system to dialogue through various problems and issues which arose during their time together.
The clan system was also used in organizing and rotating various roles and responsibilities while participants travelled and camped to ensure a smooth transition from one place to another. Undertaking the clan system provided the youth and young adults an opportunity to demonstrate and model their cultural values and behaviors which are common in many of their families and Haudenosaunee communities. This behaviour reaffirmed the positive cultural worth an individual has among their peers and the group as a whole, thus increasing a person’s pride in their identity and their well-being.

There are many theoretical social work models and approaches the practitioner could adjust to fall in line with an Indigenous approach to social work. Yet, I need to assert a caution here as an implication of this research: I strongly recommend that social work practitioners not culturally appropriate or exploit the sacredness of Indigenous cultural practices. If an Indigenous or a non-Indigenous practitioner is not provided with knowledge/teachings from an Elder or cultural carrier, they need to know they may harm the people they are working with, or even hurt themselves. Therefore, it is important when indigenizing the field of social work to involve Indigenous people, communities, Elders, and cultural carriers in the work and education of social work students. It is important to demystify our students and practitioners regarding the rich heritage and culture Native people and communities possess with Indigenous knowledge, epistemology, and experiences. I also want to stress the importance of this final implication which we encourage and provide spaces for our Indigenous scholars to research and write from their worldviews as we continue to build upon the field of Indigenous social work.
Conclusion

The Spirit of the Youth Unity Run and this research project has been a learning adventure for me personally and professionally. I have searched to understand how Onkwehonwe people heal and move forward with resilience from the compounding layers of trauma which have impacted not only my family, but many other Indigenous families and communities over many generations. This dissertation has been “a journey about a journey”—exploring how a small group of Haudenosaunee youth mobilized and led their peers, parents, Elders and communities through a five-year spiritual and cultural journey known as the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs. This research reveals the positive impact this journey has had on the self-image (identity) and well-being of those who participated.

This research explores and supports the Indigenous perspectives of culture-based activism and the importance of cultural knowledge and practices as guiding factors for social justice. In understanding this perspective the exploration of research findings and the literature moves to reviewing notions of epistemology and Indigenous agency and how this contributes to the well-being and identity of Indigenous youth/people. The writings from Indigenous scholars explain the significance for Indigenous people and their survival of connecting to the land and natural environment. Just as important, the findings from this research and the literature conveys the concept of Indigenous collectivity and outlines how this contributes to the well-being of the individual, as well to the entire nations of Indigenous people.
The intention of this research was primarily to learn from an Indigenous youth perspective the importance of Indigenous knowledge, self-determination and social justice. The research also sought to understand whether Haudenosaunee youth transformed their identity and well-being as a result of participating in a culture-based form of activism. Despite my research plan, the spiritual entities overseeing this journey reshaped my methodology to align with my responsibilities as an Indigenous mother/woman. This spiritual journey was not only to teach me how to become a researcher in the Western context. This journey also provided me with an opportunity to re-connect and understand the cosmology of Haudenosaunee knowledge and my responsibility as mother/woman/caretaker to the land, natural environment and the people. The spiritual part of the journey also determined who was going to participate and the route which we were going to travel during our journey. What I have learned is that even with a plan for research, there are many more lessons to learn when we allow the journey to guide us. For those who are Indigenous women, Indigenous, or women, research is far more a responsibility to our communities, natural environment, the earth, and future generations. Despite the number of challenges we endured during the 30-day journey on foot, we completed the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run on June 20, 2011 at the gathering of the World Peace and Prayer Day in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The journey for the Spirit of the Youth Unity Run and for this research has come to an end. However, for all of us who have embarked on this journey in various ways, our work continues on in other forms, in other ways and with other peoples. I did not want to discuss my future research and work as part of my conclusion for this research. I wanted to see this research and other work that I am interested in to somehow connect
and reconnect back to what I have learned during this process—as a way of “coming to know again” (Absolon, 2011).

**Future Research and Work:**

The emotions I have experienced as a result of my participation on various culture-based journeys resonate strongly. My relationship with the land, horses, ceremony, people I travelled with, as well the communities I have visited continues to inspire me in my work today. There are times when I really miss being on the land and immersed within our way of life as Indigenous people.

I would like to continue on in exploring Indigenous forms of culture-based activism, such as that of the Nishyuu youth who journeying from their northern communities in Quebec to Ottawa in support of Cree Chief Theresa Spence who fasted for justice for her people and for all Indigenous peoples. Also I would also like to meet and speak with Innu Elder Elizabeth Penashue regarding her journeys on foot to her traditional territory to protect the Innu culture and traditional way of life. I also want to understand whether there are commonalities or differences between Indigenous youth culture-based journeys and other forms of Indigenous social justice. I would like to understand the cultural agency and resilience of youth from various nations of Indigenous peoples and how this connects to their Indigenous knowledge and epistemology. As well, I wish to examine what happens when the journey ends and individuals return home to their families and community: are there supports or outlets for continuing and maintaining their cultural learning? I tried to honour the voices of the youth with this
research. Yet, I wonder whose voice is missing from this research? Have there been youth who have had negative or challenging experiences, and if so what can we learn from those stories and experiences? How can I honour those voices?

During my first Unity Ride and Run in 1995 with the Lakota people, I experienced a powerful connection with the horses and the land on which we travelled. It was this connection which leads me to explore horse-based interventions as a modality of social work practice. As a result, it took me approximately five years to find an association which certified practitioners in an ethically-based approach (for both horse specialists and mental health practitioners). When I did discover an association which certified people who work with horses and mental health practitioners, I spent an additional four years saving to become certified as an equine-assisted psycho-therapist through the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). Since my certification, I have conducted projects with the Hamilton Métis Women’s Circle with a focus on growth and learning from an Indigenous perspective for urban Native youth. It is my hope to continue with such projects and further my practice and research in exploring Indigenous practices of helping using horses and animals as social work interventions.
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Appendices
Appendix 1  Indigenous Youth Declaration
Kindling The Fire

We as Indigenous Youth have gathered on Haudenosaunee territory for four years to share our achievements and future prospects on peace and unity. We are the seventh generation and we accept the responsibility for the prosperity of the future generations and of our Mother Earth. Our Ancestors look to us to repeat the words that once fell on deaf ears and to stand strong as one. As our leaders have done before us, we as Indigenous Youth unify in order to rise to the challenge of continuing to wipe the tears of all nations. The Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island wish to reach our goals and to share with the world, peace and unity. We will continue to collectively gather all peoples to push our motion forward. The following statements call for immediate action. Our collective minds and hearts hereby declare the following a living document;

1. The Voices of the Youth

   1. We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call for our voice to be recognized and respected as equals.
      a) We call for effective and active participation at all gatherings and councils to network, debate and to contribute to decisions on all matters affecting us and our communities.

2. Education

   1. We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call historical truths to be told;
      a) All books that are used in the education system must be rewritten to include the stories of Indigenous peoples, written from the perspective of Indigenous voice.
      b) Indigenous Peoples have the choice to provide education which serves our best interests to preserve our culture for the coming faces.
      c) Indigenous youth must be educated in the rights we have as people
      d) We will create educational, social and recreational programs and opportunities to promote, encourage, and maintain healthy traditional lifestyles, which nurtures our talents whether they be traditional, artistic, athletic or academic.
1. All programs must be supported by our communities, elders, states, and international institutions.

3. Protecting/Preserving Language
   1. We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call for opportunities for our children to learn their native language as their original language.
      a) We call for more high quality programs be created and that funding be allocated to revive our Indigenous Language.
      b) We call for language programs to be made available to all Indigenous peoples whether they live off or on territories.

4. Treaties
   1. We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call for that each and every one of our treaties be honoured.
      a) We call for all negotiations and discussions between governments and nations be fair and respectful.
      b) We will assert jurisdiction over our lands and resources.

5. Discrimination
   1. We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call for the discrimination against Indigenous Peoples to not be tolerated.
      a) We call for all government policies, acts and laws which discriminate against Indigenous Peoples be abolished immediately.
      b) We call for all internal discrimination against youth, elders and groups of people within our communities to stop immediately.
      c) We call for all external discrimination against any other race, religion or culture to be stopped immediately.

6. Respect of Our Culture
   1. We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call for unrestricted access to our traditional, historical artifacts whether they are in museums, private collections or any other possession.
      a) Our traditional ceremonies must be recognized and respected by governments, school boards, business owners and the greater society as equal to other religious holidays and practices.
      b) We will not allow our culture and tradition to be defined by outside or foreign influences.
c) We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call for media to highlight the positive aspects of Indigenous culture rather than perpetuate stereotypes.

d) We call for all news reports relating to Indigenous peoples to accurately represent our perspective.

1. Media black-outs cannot be tolerated.

e) We call for governments and international forums to support Indigenous created media bodies.

7. Colonization

1. **We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island refuse to be subject to any form of colonization.**

   a) We refuse to allow all previous effects of colonization to pass onto the next seven generations. All hate, resentment and anguish ends now.

   b) We must reestablish the connection between the youth and the elders and work towards unity.

   c) We forgive all peoples who have damaged our culture, lands and our people.

   d) We ask that all peoples of Mother Earth join us in this healing.

8. Our Mother Earth

1. **We as Indigenous Youth of Turtle Island call for that our Mother Earth be protected at all costs.**

   a) We call for unrestricted access to sacred sites. Sacred sites must be maintained in their natural, original state.

   b) We call for all environmentally destructive behaviors to stop immediately. The health and well-being of our people and our ceremonies is dependent on the well-being of our Mother Earth.

   c) We as Indigenous peoples need to re-establish our connection to the land.

   d) We need states and multinational forums and organizations to assist and join us in reconnecting and healing all life.

   e) As guardians we implore ourselves to take action to protect, preserve and restore Mother Earth and all creation.
We as Indigenous Youth are going to apply to these statements to our personal lives, communities, and world to the best of our ability and look for others to do the same.

Cited from: http://sixnationsyouthrally2008.blogspot.ca/2008/05/indigenous-youth-declaration.html
Appendix 2  Elders Declaration

International Indigenous Elders Summit 2004
The Decade of Indigenous Peoples

Elders Declaration: Kindling a Fire DRAFT

Elders from North, South and Central America gathered on Haudenosaunee territory for six days to share our achievements and future prospects on peace and unity. We reflected on the effects of historical trauma and the path towards decolonization for Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.

A common sense of history binds us while oral traditions, lived experiences, gathered knowledge and re-found wisdom build bridges among us. Our heart rests on our kinship with one another and with all beings of the universe and the cosmos. Our spirits are no longer homeless. We are grounded on Mother Earth. We are connected to and responsible for those who are here, those who are yet to come and those who have been. Our authority flows from these sources. They set the nature, direction and pace of action. We will set the agenda, we will move it forward, we will do it now and we will monitor and measure its progress. Our collective minds and hearts hereby declare the following:

Women Give Life:

- Violence against Indigenous women must cease.
- Women are the mothers of our nations and their authority must be recognized within and outside Indigenous nations.

Living Treaties Make Healthy Nations:

- Historical treaties must be recognized and interpreted from our perspective.
- Nationhood is ours to keep and exercise.
- International treaties must secure our future and that of future generations.

Education is Right:

- It must be made available to everyone.
- It must include our own languages and the resources to support this goal.
- It must include traditional teaching practices, cultural practices and history from our perspective.
**Tradition Must Lead:**
- Indigenous leaders who hold traditional values, beliefs and cultures must be recognized and respected as leaders in their own right and by the world.

**Roots run deeply:**
- Indigenous forms of determining who our people are must be acknowledged.
- Assimilation policies and practices being forced on our people must stop.
- New forms of colonization must stop and decolonization must begin in earnest.

**Laws Exact Justice:**
- Traditional laws and forms of justice exist and must be respected.
- International tribunals must deal with the persecution and murder of our people.

**First Environments Last:**
- Environmental assessments must include the traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples.
- Mother Earth and everything she holds including water, plants and animals must be acknowledged and protected. A consciousness of waste management is necessary.
  - Genetic engineering is not acceptable.
  - Sacred sites, artefacts, and lands must be honoured, protected and restored.
  - Benefits derived from natural resources must be shared equally with Indigenous peoples.
Appendix 3  Research Invitation Letter

“The Spirit of Aboriginal Youth:”

Transforming Identity and Well-being through Cultural based Activism

Research Study: A dissertation thesis requirement in completing PhD in the Faculty of Social Work the University of Wilfrid Laurier - REB # 2752

July 6, 2011

I would like to invite you to participant in a study that will examine the connection of indigenous knowledge and activism, and how this connects to a sense of identity, well-being and purpose for Onkwehonwe/Native youth.

There are two main areas to my work:

• To hear and listen to the voices of our Onkwehonwe/Native youth (ages 16 and over) and their experience as they participate on the Spirit of the Youth (SOY) Unity Run(s); and

• To understand how Haudenosaunee/Native identity and well-being is connected to Native culture, the land and the natural environment for the purpose of healing, unity, peace and social justice among Onkwehonwe people.

The study will record your experience as Onkwehonwe/Native youth during your participation with the Unity Runs 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2011. My purpose for this study is to understand how your experience can be used to assist organizations, social workers and front line workers who may work with Native youth.

I am also encouraging the parents, adults and elders who also participated with the SOY Unity Runs 2005 to 2011 to share their views of the SOY Unity Runs and the impact it has had on Native youth.

By participating in this study, you and I will have a conversation that will take approximately take 1 to 1 ½ hours. Your responses will be audio taped and with approval. Your responses will remain confidential and will not identify you in any matter, unless you agree and want your identity and name used in this research. You are free to decline answering any questions and may stop/quit the interview at anytime. Please note if you are an Elder or Cultural Knowledge Carrier, you have the choice to use your personal name and identity in this study, or not.

Please be advised that I will be using your interview and quotations from your interview in my dissertation, as well as in future publication such as: a book, book
chapters, research journals and conference presentations. I will take care not to reveal your identity and will remove all identifying information. All the information that is collected in this research will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office for seven years after the dissertation thesis has been approved and published.

You may withdraw your participation from this research at any time by contacting me. Upon your withdrawal from this research study, your information will be destroyed immediately and not used.

This research study has been reviewed and has received clearance through Six Nations Band Council Ethics Committee and Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board.

If you have any questions or concerns about your involvement with this research study, please contact the Six Nations Band Council Ethics Committee at (519) 445-2201 or you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-1970 ext.5225 or rbasso@wlu.ca

You may also contact my PhD Supervisors at Wilfrid Laurier University in the Faculty of Social Work: Dr. Shoshana Pollack, 519-884-1970 ext. 5220, spollack@wlu.ca and Dr. Martha Kuwee Kumsa, 519-884-1970 ext. 5227, mkumsa@wlu.ca

Thank you for your interest in this research study.

Sincerely,

Bonnie Freeman, MSW/RSW
Ph.D. Candidate, WLU Faculty of Social Work
Tele: (519) 445-0972 or Cell: (519) 865-0927
free2048@mylaurier.ca or free2048@gmail.com
Appendix 4  Research Consent Form

“The Spirit of Aboriginal Youth:”
Transforming Identity and Well-being through Cultural based Activism
Bonnie Freeman, MSW/RSW
A dissertation thesis requirement in completing a PhD in the
Faculty of Social Work, University of Wilfrid Laurier

Wilfrid Laurier University Faculty of Social Work PhD Supervisors:
Dr. Shoshana Pollack, 519-884-1970 ext. 5220, spollack@wlu.ca and
Dr. Martha Kuwee Kumsa, 519-884-1970 ext. 5227, mkumsa@wlu.ca

Consent - REB # 2752:
I hereby consent to participate and be recorded in the above research study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may change my mind and refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. I may decline in answering any questions or I may stop the interview at any time. I understand that some of the things that I may say may be directly quoted in the text of the final dissertation, as well subsequent publications such as books, book chapters and research journals.

I hereby agree to participate in the above dissertation research study:

__________________________________________________________
Participant Signature  Print Name (optional)  Date
Age 16 and over

__________________________________________________________
Parent/Guardian Signature  Print Name  Date
If between ages 16 & 18

__________________________________________________________
Researcher/Interviewer  Print Name  Date

☐ I give consent to the use of all photographs and video recordings of myself during the Spirit of the Youth Unity Runs’ from 2005; 2006; 2007, 2008 and 2011 to be used in this research study and in the final dissertation document.

☐ I give consent to use quotations from my interview—audio and or video recorded to be used in this research, final dissertation, and future publications.

Consent to not to use or to use personal Name/Identity in this research

☐
I **do not** want my own personal Name/Identity disclosed in this research study.

I **want you to use** my own personal Name and Identity in this research study *(age 18 & older).*
Appendix 5  Interview Guide/Questions

The interview would begin with “visiting” and sharing who we are and where we come from.

These questions are based on the conceptual framework of the transcendence of Haudenosaunee culture across the landscape and in a journey which carries forward the concepts of: Peace (internal and external harmony), Power (of a Good Mind) and Righteousness (the virtue of guiding our behaviour/actions with our Good Mind).

1. What brought you to participate with the Unity Run?
   a. What motivated you to come on this Unity Run?

2. What were some of the most memorable experiences or stories you have about the Unity Run?

3. How has the Unity Run experience had an impact on you—your views, attitudes and well-being?
   a. How does your experience relate to the purpose of the Unity Run?
   b. Why is the Unity Run important for Native/Aboriginal youth?

4. What are some of your thoughts and feelings in how this Unity Run has had on how you view yourself as a Native person?
   a. Has this view of yourself changed since you have been on this Run?

5. What are some of the problems and issues that you are aware Aboriginal youth suffer within their communities?
   a. What are your thoughts about experiences such as the Unity Run in overcoming some of these issues and problems youth face?
   b. What advice would you give Native youth from your experience being on the Unity Run?
6. What are some of your thoughts and feelings in how this Unity Run and or journey have on your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being?
   a. How did the Unity Rides connect you to your culture, ceremonies/traditions and Native language?
   b. What are your thoughts about being on the land and in the natural environment on these Unity Rides/Runs?
   c. How did the Unity Ride/Runs connect you to healing, well-being and your identity as a Native person?

7. How do our Haudenosaunee concepts of Peace, Power and Righteousness relate to the Unity Run?
   a. You have two young women as leaders for the Unity Run—how does this relate to Haudenosaunee culture? Why do you think it is important?

8. In your own words, what is activism for Native people? Is the Unity Run a form of activism? If so, how?

9. Is Native culture and spirituality an important part of activism? If so, how?

10. What advice would you offer social workers or people who work with Native youth, in relation to your experience with the Unity Run?
Appendix 6  Thank you Note

After the Interview was complete: each interviewee was presented with a Card and in each card the inscription read:

Nya:weh for speaking with me and sharing your experience to one of the most important ventures and journeys our Haudenosaunee youth have undertaken with the Unity Run.

Your input will contribute to understanding our youth, their issues and their plight towards social justice while ensuring that our people and those to come in the future generations will have culture, language, identity and a place on this earth!

Nya:weh for also contributing to my understanding and towards my dissertation work.

O:nen, Bonnie
Appendix 7  Debriefing Statement

Title: Spirit of Aboriginal Youth: Transformation of Identity and Well-being Through Culturally-based Activism
Wilfrid Laurier University REB # 2752
Researcher: Bonnie M. Freeman

Thank you for your participation in our study.

This study is looking at the connection of indigenous knowledge and activism, and how this connects to a sense of identity, well-being, and purpose for Aboriginal youth. This study is focused on your experience as Onkwehonwe/Native youth during your participation on the Unity Runs 2011, as well as the 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 Unity Runs.

My purpose of this study is to:

- To hear and listen to the voices of our Onkwehonwe/Native youth (ages 16 and over) and their experience as they participate on the Unity Runs.
- To understand how Haudenosaunee/Native identity and well-being is connected to Haudenosaunee/Native culture, the land and the nature environment for the healing, unity, peace and social justice among Onkwehonwe people.
- To understand how your experience and Native culturally activities be integrated to assist social and community workers in working with Onkwehonwe/Native youth.

There was no deception used in the conduct of this study. However, should you feel discomfort, regret or distress for any reason upon the completion of this study, please contact me as soon as possible and I will connect you with helpers and or an Aboriginal Elder to speak with. You also may speak with your Unity Run Youth Leaders: Nib Martin and Stacey Green, who will also assist you.

I will be using your quotations from interviews you have provided to me in this study. If you feel that you shared something in your interview that you were not comfortable or regretted in sharing, you can withdraw all or parts of your interview from this study at any time. That information would be destroyed and you would not suffer any consequences from withdrawing.

If you should have any questions concerning your participation, please feel free to contact my PhD Supervisors at Wilfrid Laurier University in the Faculty of Social Work: Dr. Shoshana Pollack, 519-884-1970 ext. 5220, spollack@wlu.ca and Dr. Martha Kuwee Kumsa, 519-884-1970 ext. 5227, mkumsa@wlu.ca

I will also available for any additional information and may be contacted through email: Bonnie Freeman free2048@mylaurier.ca

Your responses during our conversation/interview and or Talking Circles were important and greatly appreciated.
A report of this research should be ready for circulation by July of 2012. If you would like to receive a copy, please send an e-mail to me at the above email expressing your interest in the results and providing your e-mail address.

Nya:weh (Thank you) again for your participation.
Appendix 8  2011 International World Peace and Prayer Day Poster

This poster represents the final destination in the 2011 SOY Unity Run in which the SOY youth handed back the Unity Ride and Run to the Lakota and Dakota nations during this event and through ceremony.

http://www.worldpeaceandprayerday2011.org
retrieved on Nov. 20, 2013 through
http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/06/19/sacred-sites-bdote-minnesota-world-peace-and-prayer-day-38873 (Note: the 2011 World Peace & Prayer Day site is no longer active)