

July 11, 2021

Dear UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,

Tansi, Sandra Lamouche nitsikason, niya nehiyaw iskwew, ayisiniew ota askiy. Hello, My name is Sandra Lamouche, I am a Cree woman, I am a human of this land.

I recently completed my Masters Thesis in Indigenous Studies titled Ê-nitonahk Miyo-Pimâtisiwin (Seeking the Good Life) Through Indigenous Dance. I interviewed over fifteen Indigenous artists and dancers from around the world. It was unanimous agreement that Indigenous dance leads to the good life. The Cree translation of this term means to live a life of *learning, growing and being-in- becoming* as explained by Dr. Micheal Hart, Cree scholar and requires to balance the spiritual, physical, emotion and mental aspects of ourselves. As Dr. Michael Hart notes, “Of all the events that have occurred, the process and effects of colonization have influenced all facets of Aboriginal peoples’ lives on various levels, including the national, communal, familial and individual” (49-50). He also says that it is suggested that the spiritual aspect, which includes culture and identity, has suffered the most. In my research I found that this was the most destructive to Indigenous well being as the spiritual is the spark that inspires us to action and is an important catalyst for life changing learning and growing, leading to wellbeing. Dance as a central part of Indigenous spirituality, ceremony, culture and identity, was one aspect that was directly targeted by colonization and this is ongoing today as we face cultural marginalization and have no recourse, no other place to go to learn our cultures. Having the option to choose your own culture, identity, and spirituality is an essential aspect. Self-determination is essential to healing and well being. This option is being systematically denied in Canada to all Indigenous youth. It is only through family and community that some are able to search and access this away from the systems of oppression. Eurocentric and Christian religions and foundations in education and other systems is a direct assault on the spiritual beliefs and practices of the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

The spiritual aspect was the most important part of creating a healthy and balanced life. Spirit is literally the spark and motivation that creates change and well being in an Indigenous worldview. The most important connection is learning this in childhood from elders. Spiritual is

represented through culture and identity, of course this also includes ceremony and language. The most important time for this to be taught is in childhood. Currently in Canada the education system disregards Indigenous people, culture, language and especially ceremony. There is little option and support for Indigenous families to educate their own children in their own ways, especially financially, this was my experience as a parent homeschooling my children during COVID. Our education system in Canada lack in accountability, inclusion and had not had any serious movement in terms of reconciliation. The purpose of residential schools was to teach Christian beliefs, in order to stop Indigenous beliefs and culture, this is exactly what continues to happen in the education system today on a large scale. I have worked in the education system for over a decade and received an award for my leadership. I have seen first hand how little is taught about Indigenous history, culture, and language. I left the education system in 2019 due to PTSD symptoms that directly resulted from an abusive work environment, microaggressions and intergenerational trauma. These are the conditions Indigenous people too often face when trying to be included and make changes towards Reconciliation in Canada.

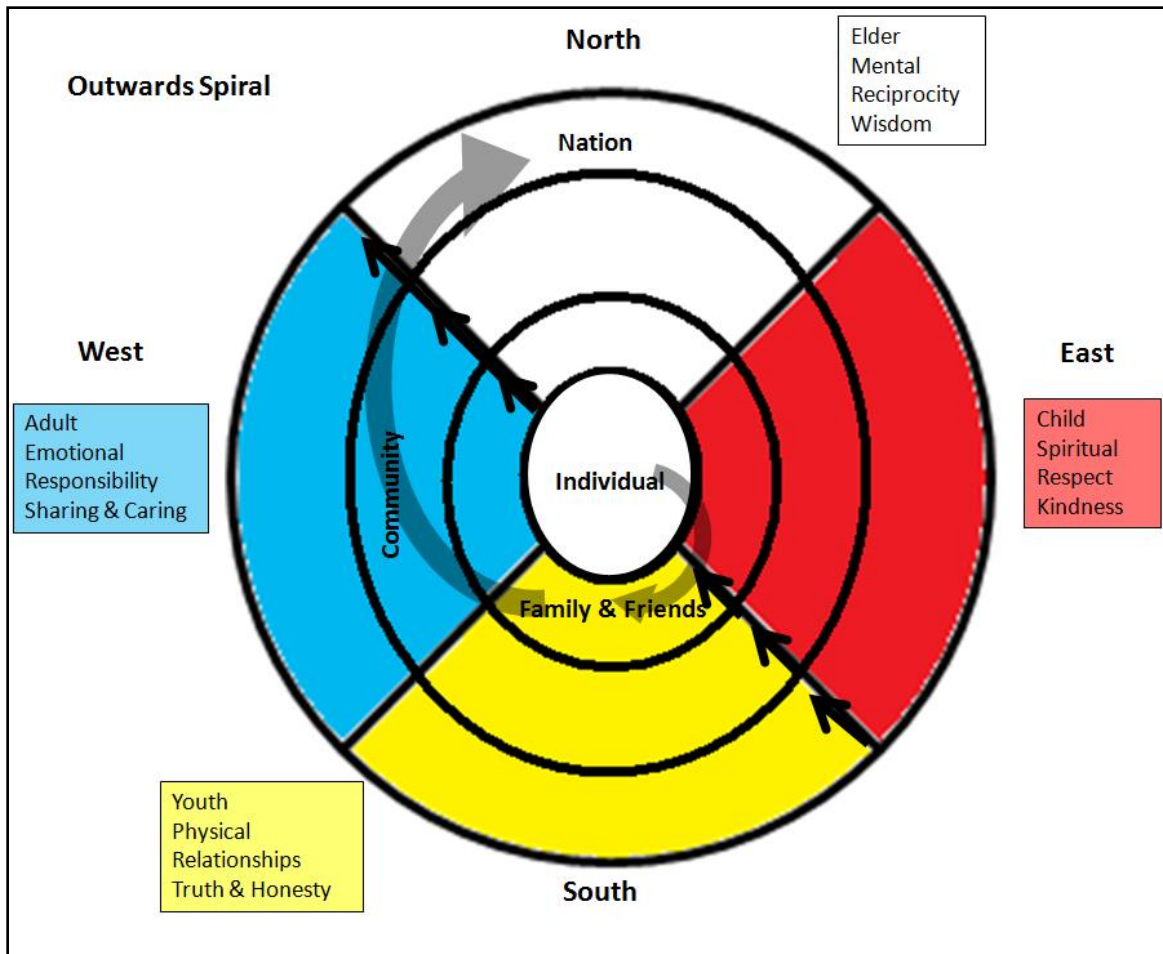
In terms of Indigenous dance, the outwards spiral begins in the centre when we first learn the teachings and stories associated with our dances. This is the spiritual, which encompasses our culture and identity. For me this began with learning the hoop dance. Although I had tried other Native and Western dance styles, the hoop dance, combined with the story and teachings, is what led to a transformation in my life. As the spiral moves east, the direction related to respect and kindness, we are reminded that both the elder and child (or teacher and student) need to be respectful in order to effectively teach and learn and this is shown through kindness.

As the spiral transitions to the southern direction and the second concentric circle, friends and family, we put our teachings into practice so that they become a part of our physical world. My experiences with both Native and Western dance highlighted cultural aspects in Native dance traditions. I began to put the teachings into practice, physically dancing, abstaining from drugs and alcohol, and trying to live a balanced and healthy lifestyle. These changes in physical well-being and behaviours influence our relationships with our family and friends. This creates healthy relationships informed by our cultural values and beliefs of truth and honesty.

As the spiral continues west and moves to the community level of the concentric circles, it teaches us about the responsibilities of adulthood and the emotional balance required to meet

them. For me, this is part of the journey of Ê-nitonahk Miyo-Pimâtisiwin that includes delivering workshops and creating performances in different communities, sharing my experiences and knowledge of my language and culture through traditional and contemporary practices, while participating in community gatherings, events and ceremonies. In these ways as adults we influence not just our friends and families, but also our communities.

In the north, the Medicine Wheel spirals out to the nation, as the wisdom of our elders supports the healing of our nations. When elders pass their knowledge on to the younger generations, the spiral begins anew. This reciprocity of wisdom is essential for the culture to continue. For me, this is the next part of my journey, which I have already begun with this thesis and by working with national and international choreographers and teachers, as well, as working with youth by teaching dance and culture; I still have much to learn as a dancer and teacher myself. As my understandings of the spiral deepens and I experience the layers of teachings and how the quadrants combined to create “a collective of interdependent knowledges” (Bell 34). I am inspired to continue learning about dance and performance as I continue to practice and participate in Indigenous dance, performing, teaching and sharing with others.



This outwards spiral was seen in the stories and experiences of the Indigenous dancers I interviewed, including my own journey. The biggest disruption I saw was that myself and other Indigenous people were not able to learn their culture, identity and spirituality as children, we often didn't get to experience this until adulthood, after leaving the education system and having more options, including in university settings to reconnect to our cultures. This is how the outwards spiral was formed. It is essential that elders are enabled to pass on Indigenous knowledge to the youth, on a regular and consistent basis. This is how our spirituality has always survived and this is being severely interrupted in the education system. There are many barriers and biases against Indigenous spirituality, culture and identity making it difficult for our people to practice these ways.

Anti-Indigenous racism is widespread and leads to the discrediting of Indigenous knowledge. Anti-Indigenous racism specifically targets Indigenous identity and culture with demeaning stereotypes and images. This often leads to unequal treatment and inequity in all

facets of life. As mentioned above this is a spiritual attack, as defined by Indigenous understandings of spirituality.

Sincerely,

Sandra Lamouche, M.A. Indigenous Studies