

FOCUS



# Showing Love in Our Actions

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
ALEX WILSON

INTERVIEWED By SAFOURA NOURBAKHSH

For most people it is difficult to conceive of gender and sexuality as social constructions based on one's cultural landscape and worldview. Rather we tend to see gender and sexuality as natural/normal phenomenon with a fixed set of meanings. The following interview with Alex Wilson, an Associate Professor and the Academic Director of the Aboriginal Education Research Center at the University of Saskatchewan, offers valuable insights into the intersection between spirituality and gender/sexuality in the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. In this First Nation's holistic worldview, queer, feminist, and environmental activism are important to the spiritual identity of the culture. Alex Wilson's work as a researcher, educator, and community organizer has contributed greatly to indigenous research on gender and sexuality as well as grassroots interventions on behalf of preservation of land and water.



Let's start with the question of indigenous spirituality especially from your spiritual tradition. All spiritual traditions try to answer some of these questions: where do we come from, why are we here, what is our purpose in life. What is the answer to these questions according to your spiritual practice, your spiritual tradition? Okay, well let's start with we are from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation which is a First Nation that is located in Northern Canada, along the Saskatchewan River Delta system. The Saskatchewan River Delta system is one of the largest fresh water deltas on the planet. It's comprised of the Saskatchewan River but also many lakes and smaller rivers and streams that are connected to that, so the place specifically where all my family is from, *Pamuskatapan*, means where you have to get out of the canoe and kind of pull it along. Our family name, our clan, as it is said in English, is *Wassenas* which means "shining light from within." So there's an understanding in our lineage that we're connected, or related, to light.

The reason why I start that way is because our genealogy is very much intimately connected to land as is our spiritual tradition. We are Cree and our dialect is called the n-dialect or Swampy Cree. Within our language we do have a concept of *kisemanito* which in English is translated to "Great Spirit" or "Great Mystery." There's an understanding in that, that there's a continuous energy that connects everything, so everything is related, so relationality. Along with relationality comes relational accountability, meaning that we are accountable to all our relations. Our relations aren't just human relations, but also extend to the environment, the land, animals, plants, all living things and then beyond that into the wider universe.

We understand *kisemanito*, or the concept I should say, as also about the relationship, therefore relationality applies to ideas and concepts as well implying that we have a responsibility to think about, talk about, take action on philosophies as well. Built into that concept is the understanding that components of life are a mystery, that we'll never know everything. And in fact, sometimes we know nothing. There is a humility built right into the spiritual system that is understood in the language to be connectedness, but also that to answer those three questions you posed, each of us might have a somewhat different answer. Although one of the most important things would be the continuity of energy, so in our origin stories we have this understanding that energy predates the origins of Earth, that predates this modern time era that we're in, that predates this physical form that we are in right now. This is contained in language. For example, we have a word for "a star" which is *achak* and in Cree it's the same word for "your spirit," which is *kitachak* so the understanding is there that this continual energy exists that links us to beyond, out and beyond—out into the universe.

The language is organized around that spiritual system and so it's gender-based on whether something is animate or has a spiritual purpose, or inanimate. Unlike other languages, like some Western traditions and languages where the language is gendered like male/female, man/woman, but in Cree it isn't that way. There is a worldview that is all predicated on a spiritual belief system and part of that, that belief system, is recognizing that we'll never know everything and a recognition of diversity and complexity.

One thing I wasn't clear about is this idea of gendered language: animate, inanimate. How is animate gendered? Well, gender just means dividing or categorizing. The way the language is "gendered," or the way it's categorized is animate or inanimate. It has nothing to do with the cultural construction of human bodies or the way that we gender human bodies. For example we don't have pronouns such as she or he in the language.

In your explanation, your definition of your spirituality, you talk about connectivity, you talk about relational accountability, reciprocity. In your writing you talk about a holistic world view. Does love have any place in your tradition, like in the Sufi tradition, in many traditions, in ways of interpreting those traditions, love is the purpose of creation. How does that translate in your culture? Absolutely, that's the natural order that everything else hinges upon. In our creation stories, and they're ongoing, there's a central kind of character, energy, called *Weesageychak*, it is the constellation known as Orion in English, and in that term *Weesageychak*—if you break it down, again, the last part of the word *achak* means "star" or "spirit," and then the first part means "sour" or "tart," like a tart spirit, kind of a mischievous spirit. That's one way of looking at the term and another way is in the middle of the word *sakihi* which means "love." There's an understanding that, again, continuity between the

wider cosmos and our existence here on Earth and our ongoing creation stories that this energy, a great mystery, is really about love. And there are actual laws or ways of being that are built around that, and as mentioned that's a central one, so *sakihiwawin* is a natural order that says that you should love in your actions. When you don't follow that kind of natural flow there are consequences. There are consequences or implications that kind of hinge on that so there's *pastahowin* and *otchiniwan* meaning that on a physical/material level, there are consequences. So, for example, in the far north, where there is frost on the ground all the time, when you step on the ground you can, literally your footprint can be there for a hundred years. It's always there and you can literally see your imprint on the earth. That exists everywhere, it's just that we can't see it. It is more prominent in the far north. You become very cognizant of the relationship with the land when you see the imprint that you're making. That's like "for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction" so that there are consequences for the way we act and behave and there's consequences on that material level, you know if you harm an animal, for example, that comes back to you and then also comes back on a spiritual level. It's similar to the concept of karma, so there's that understanding. Part of that showing love in your actions is also standing up and protecting land and animals, those kind of activist type things that people and mothers do; taking action to protect or stopping violence, speaking up, coming out—those kinds of things are in line with showing love in your actions. So yes, love is what everything hinges upon.

**Good. Another question is, in our community there is a master, there is a spiritual leader, and there is a hierarchy. It seems that in your spiritual community you don't have that hierarchy. Or am I mistaken?** No, not in Swampy Cree. It's a non-hierarchic relationship that we have with the land and with that Great Mystery. There's not an understanding that the "Great" means bigger or better than you. Perhaps all encompassing.

**So there is no person who has a better understanding of that mystery who would help you understand it better?** There are roles that certain people play within the community and some of them are spiritual leaders because they practice that their entire lives, and others are land practitioners, so they understand medicines, and then there are pipe carriers and so forth. I think that there is a concept in Cree that everybody is equal within the circle so that each person has a gift that they bring and then I guess maybe elders would be the knowledge keepers that have some kind of knowledge, but there isn't that notion of a priest or... maybe medicine people, but again, it's dependent on the community. Each is a bit different.

**Now, let's talk about the question of gender and sexual diversity. Again, talking about that in relation to indigenous culture is a very vast field, but more specifically in your cul-**

**ture, because in your writing it seems to me that you are arguing that gender and sexual diversity in indigenous cultures never created, or led to, a formation of subcultures. Can you explain that? Or where is the evidence that there was always gender and sexual diversity in indigenous cultures and it was pretty much accepted?** Well, I think that there's a tremendous amount of variation between indigenous nations so I wouldn't say that for all indigenous nations there was no subculture because I know in some communities there might have been groups, I'm not sure, but talking about my own culture, which is the Opaskwayak Cree Nation there was no subculture for what we would call gay folks today. Everybody was just a part of the community. And that's evident in the language because we don't have a word for gay people. And speaking to many, many elders and Cree language speakers over the past thirty years, there were descriptions of people, but there's no term for a gay man, or a lesbian. Some people have interpreted that to mean there were no gay people, but we know that's false, too, because there are many stories like of the two guys who lived over behind my grandmother's house. They were together for fifty years, or other couples who have been the fabric of the community. One way we know that it existed is that we're still here, so our existence today is a testament to our existence in the past.

**The term "two-spirit" is a term recently coined, as recent as the 1990s, as a way of empowering queer identity within the indigenous culture and community and also in opposition to many derogatory names used by colonizers and Western anthropologists. First of all, can you explain that in terms of what two-spirit really means and also what is a question for me and possibly for other people who come to this for the first time, is the limitation of the term as a construct that stays within the binary of gender rather than conveying a kind of fluidity of gender and sexual identity.** Well, the term two-spirit, like you said, came about in the 90s. It was a term that someone had a vision about and they presented that to the community, the community accepted it and had a naming ceremony and accepted the term at the time to mean a self-descriptor for people that were First Nations or indigenous Canadian and also LGBT. That was the language people used at the time. The two in the two-spirit can be misleading because some people interpret that to mean male/female. The way myself and others currently interpret the two is people that acknowledge and affirm and self-describe as being... as holding spirituality as intimately as important as other aspects of our identity, so First Nations' people that are queer but also connected, a spiritual connection, to land and the wider universe. To me the two is physical or material and spiritual or it's liminal like standing in a doorway where you can see both rooms. I don't know if that's in terms of gender or masculine/feminine but it could be queer and First Nations. There's a little bit of leeway in the interpretation and it definitely has shifted over the years because our language has shifted in English and our scholarship and our knowledge

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around reviving traditions has kind of been more openly discussed. A lot of youth today don't use the term two-spirit, they use the term queer or they use the term, if there was a term, in their indigenous language to refer to gender diversity or sexual diversity.

**Are there terms that in other indigenous cultures...?** Yes, most. Dine or Navajos are a well-known example because they've got, I think it's four or five different genders in their language.

**You also talk about the concept of "coming in" in addition to the concept of coming out, that is the phrase used in Western culture. I want you to talk about that.** Okay. The term coming in came about through research that I was doing for my doctoral dissertation. I interviewed self-described two-spirit people from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and some lived in B.C. and Ontario, and asked them what they thought the term two-spirit meant, and also asked them how, despite all these colonial forces that have impacted two-spirit people, how do people maintain empowered and happy lives. Through these interviews there were a number of themes that emerged, commonalities between people's stories and one of them was that all the people in the study have very strong familial and community ties and relationships when they were really young and had very strong ties to the land and their community and then at some point they had to start fragmenting aspects of their identity, so starting to identify as Native and this and that, male, or whatever, so that often the queer part of their identity was hidden or not acknowledged. What happened then is that many people, actually all of them, left their community, myself included, either to get away from a homophobic setting in the family or community, or to seek that gay mecca out there like San Francisco, Vancouver or even just the next larger city like Saskatoon or Winnipeg. Everybody went through that kind of shift from leaving their home community and in some ways having to cut ties, cutting loose from some of those colonial impacts but also trying to connect in a larger gay community, and then very soon found out that within the mainstream queer community there were all these different interconnecting forms of aggression such as misogyny, classism, and racism especially, so very quickly having to figure out where we belonged and where we didn't belong. Part of that figuring out where we belonged often meant recreating a community, or coming into and understanding ourselves that puts us in relation with our communities whether they're self-created communities or whether they are our actual physical land and place com-

munities that we're from. So that was the term "coming in," coming in to the circle rather than declaring yourself as an individual, autotomic kind of person that has overcome all these various... so that you can come "out," it is seeing yourself in relation to everything that's a part of you and that you are a part of. So that's where the term coming in came from.

**What kind of education has been needed in the indigenous communities around gender and sexual diversity to facilitate "coming in," and how does it relate to the internalization of gender and sexual norms imposed by white colonizers? And how receptive has the community been?** I'm kind of fortunate that I grew up in a community that has a lot of "out" people, or people that are openly queer, so there are those people that came before me that... sometimes it comes out of necessity too because when the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our First Nations communities really hit hard, we lost a lot of people very quickly so out of necessity grandmothers became activists and as part of that activism, had to acknowledge also that there were gay men in our community that were being impacted by the virus, so part of that was teaching about homophobia and trying to undo it. But there's always been this continual thread of resistance to colonial forces and I would say that continual thread is our spirituality. That's always been there and sometimes you have to just look a little harder to find the people that embody it or that connect to it and for many people they are unable to find those folks and find an extremely high suicide rate for two-spirit people. Sixty percent of trans-identified Native Americans have attempted suicide and the suicide rates for two-spirit-identified people are ten times higher than any other population in Canada. It's a serious, serious thing.

There's a tendency to kind of, sometimes, romanticize our spirituality and say everything's holistic and good and we know we're connected to everything, but the reality is that those colonial factors have impacted all of us. And yes, people internalize that and some people internalize it in ways that are self-damaging, or self-harming. Other people internalize it and then externalize it in the form of anger and then there's others that are able to do it in a more, what mainstream society would call healthiness, too. It's a complex issue and it's a complex question because every community is different, like there's some isolated First Nations that have over twelve churches in a small community of 2,000. The competition for souls has been incredible up here and so I guess it just kind of depends on a lucky storm, a perfect storm. [both laugh] But it is a serious thing because these trans-identified

kids are dropping out of school as early as third grade. That's an active form of resistance. That's healthy. What would make a third grader not want to go to school? Well, something as simple as being afraid to use the washroom. Not a safe space. Homelessness rate is extremely high for two-spirit youth and adults. Those realities are there so we can't really ignore them and say that we're accepted when in reality many people aren't, so it's an ongoing thing. I think once people do realize and recognize that we do have a place within our traditional societies as well, then at least we can say, wow, we do belong here. So the coming in ceremonies that people have started doing across Canada and the U.S., I think, are really important because it's time for the community to make a stand and say yes, you are welcome here. And not only are you welcome, but you have valuable things to contribute to our community.

**My last question relates to what most people think of as Western concepts, like feminism or queer... obviously your formal education is a Western education. You graduated from Harvard, so borrowing these concepts... Do you have to reconcile that with your spiritual tradition somehow, or do you even consider these concepts as Western concepts?** To me there's no reconciliation because those concepts exist already in our language. Feminism exists within our language so we have that concept of everybody being within the circle, we have an analysis of power, and in fact, Western feminism came from indigenous women.

**Iroquois Nation? Is that the argument?** Yes, so those ideas exist in the Mohawks and elsewhere as well. And when I've talked to my dad about this he's explained the concept within our language and how it's very much aligned with feminism so I don't have any conflict at all with that. And the other one was queer. Yeah, I think that also kind of exists because



if you think of non-binary understanding of the world then that's queer. And a lot of our trickster characters like the *Weesageychak* we spoke of earlier was very much queer, shifting from male to female, to tree to animal. That's going beyond many, many different boundaries and borders, so non-binary again, so how more queer could you get? [both laugh]

**Exactly! But could you explain a little bit more about your definition of feminism?** I don't have a definition, but I do have a contextualization and that would be our philosophies or ways of being that are around this notion of showing love in your actions, then there's these consequences when you don't really examine or do an analysis of power dynamics.