

Building Warrior-Caregivers

I am my body, but the self that has a body is a cultural creation. We begin developing our selves in infancy. Children who are loved learn that they are loveable and that piece of cultural information, a meme, becomes part of who they are. Thousands of experiences are interpreted and become the stuff of which selves are made. Interpretations are not made in a vacuum. Cultures provide templates or models of what it is to be a girl, a boy, a man, a woman, a mother and a father, and these models are used by families to guide them in the creation of selves in children.

Using residential schools, the churches attempted to re-engineer the selves of aboriginal children. It was a butcher job with pieces of European templates grafted on emergent aboriginal identities, often with those identities interpreted as evil or sinful. The president of the Native Mental Health Association of Canada, Bill Mussel, estimates that this has resulted in seven out of 10 aboriginal men having wounded selves. In his book, *Warrior-caregivers: Understanding the challenges and healing of First Nations men*, he proposes a model that aboriginal men can use in re-engineering their selves.

As children, we are not in control of the construction of our selves. We accept what we are given, and that comes to feel natural or right. Thus, if I come to define myself as stupid, shy, violent or without emotion, I will interpret new experiences in ways that keeps those parts of my self-definition in place. As adults we have the power to change our selves, but it is not easy. We have to fight the feeling that the old self generates, that this is “just the way I am and there is nothing I can do about it”. Replacing an old self with a new self is hard work. It requires changes to thinking, feeling and behaviour. It also requires direction, a model to which we can aspire.

Mussel calls on aboriginal men to engage in personal renewal focussing on self-care, self-determination, bravery, wisdom and togetherness. He suggests that the roles of warrior and caregiver can be combined in the mission of fighting for improvements in community life. Warrior-caregivers prepare for this role by healing from historic traumas, developing healthy relationships, and sharpening leadership skills. The warrior-caregiver combines consideration of the past, present and future while balancing goal-directed behaviour with harmony and nature.

Mussel leaves us with the implication that the healing that has occurred in our communities has been led by the women, and that more men need to engage in the process of defining and implementing valued male roles. This requires dialogue, consensus building and community development. The self is not developed in isolation but is part of a process of interaction and negotiation with others. Each community will develop their own templates based on their own traditions and priorities. According to Humanist writer Peg Tittle, we have a huge opportunity:

“To choose our cultures, to choose our practices, our beliefs, and our values, to so choose our identities according to rational bases, is to be responsible for ourselves.”