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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Life in foster home, cultural suppression.
- Description of suppression on reserves in 1950's.
- Description of native values and philosophy.
- Role of sweat lodges.

Alex: The following is an interview with Vern Harper, of Toronto. The interview is being conducted in the Native Canadian Centre, 16 Spadina Road, on June 23, 1983, by Alex Cywink. Mr. Harper has a lot to say and I believe that with a few more years he should again be interviewed to find out more of the native culture.

Alex: Now maybe you can start with when and where you were born, of the names and background.

Vern: Oh yeah. I was born June 17, 1936, in Toronto. My mother came down from Mistawasis Indian Reserve in Saskatchewan, in the '30s. And she met my father, my father was a Metis, he was Irish and Cree. But the interesting thing was Irish Gypsy and Cree. His grandfather originally came from Ireland, and he fought with the French against the British

in... After the battle of Plains of Abraham the... when the French were defeated, all the Irishmen who fought with the French, they were going to be hanged as traitors to the -- to England. And so the French took them in. My grandfather, on my father's side, he married into an Indian... and a lot of French did that. And then on my mother's side, my mother's side is, her grandfather was a hereditary chief. I'm the fifth generation grandson of Mistawasis, who was a Cree hereditary chief.

So my mother came down during the Depression, was with my father. And it was very hard on them and my father couldn't cope with things and left. He got out of work, he got laid off and he just couldn't handle it and so he left. And there was my mother with four children, and her health wasn't that good

and she died; so we were, that's... well I think I was four years old when she died. So I was born in and raised in Toronto, up to a point where I was not quite sixteen where I started going back to what I call trace my roots. And I went back to Saskatchewan and I started. So ever since then on, you know, process of learning the two cultures and it's been quite difficult because going back and forth, and different values, different societies. A lot of times going back, going in and out of them is that you get into what you call a culture shock, and people... I've learned how to deal with it now.

The early period of my life is that I was, I was never Christianized but I was taught basic Christian teachings, and I was... in fact it was quite ironic that I was placed in a foster home that were Protestant and were Orangemen, and my background was totally the opposite. And so I come from a kind of a background, but in that period from the time I was four years old, at the time when I was four years old I could talk my language, I could talk Cree. But I was totally cut off, I was totally isolated after my mother died, and we were put into the foster home, white foster home, where I never heard Cree again until I was about sixteen years old.

One of the interesting things is I never really got any formal education, because I was never made to go to school. So I learned... I used to listen to the radio a lot and it's really, it's kind of really something because that's where I, it helped me with my oral history because I had to learn to remember things, because I couldn't read or write -- so I had to remember everything and I used to listen to the radio, and record things in my mind.

Alex: What were foster homes like?

Vern: Oh, at that time the foster homes were very, almost coming out of the Victorian age. '40s, early '50s was, they're still back, their attitudes were still from the Victorian age where I think the social workers were still single, spinsters. We were very fortunate in the foster home I was in -- they never abused us or that. In fact they, but they... see the adoptions as it is, and as the system of

adoption is a lie. So if you've been taught a lie and you're brought into a lie, you learn how to lie. And that's where I learnt how to lie, in the adoption program, foster, you know, foster parents. Because what they were trying to do is make -- I was a Mistawasis, that was my family name, I'm a Mistawasis from that family and they were trying to make a Jones out of me, and it doesn't work. And then many ways what they were doing was de-feathering me. But they taught me basic things and table manners and all that, which I could have got from my own people.

But I look back now and they were very condescending, and when I was good that was the Irish in me, and when I was bad that was the Indian in me, what they considered bad. If I was misbehaving that was bad and that's the Indian heritage in me. So I was, a lot of things were very contradicting. But the other Children's Aid they hardly, with my education they couldn't care less, and I only see the social worker every so often. And she's from the old school. And every so often they would take us down to a shelter and get us outdated -- give us outdated clothes and stuff like that. I remember I was fourteen years old when I wore my first pants. I had to wear breeks and shorts in the summertime. And they weren't the shorts that what we have now, but long shorts which were very hot, very uncomfortable; full length socks. We were expected

to go to church, wear a tie and jacket and that. It was still -- Toronto in the '40s was still -- I remember the policemen still had bobby hats on just the English. Everything was closed up on Sundays, everything was closed right up. But it was a fairly stable time. I was, I had my three meals a day, a nice bedroom, and I had my brothers with me, so it was pretty good in some ways. But I wasn't getting what I needed, I needed more tools for my own culture, which I was being deprived of.

Alex: What other natives did you interact with?

Vern: Oh, I was totally cut off. I never seen any.

Alex: Your brothers?

Vern: Yeah, just my brothers, that's all, that's all, only my brothers. But the rest was totally isolated. I probably could have stayed that way if it wasn't... I made a decision when I was not quite, I was fifteen and I made a decision to go seek my relatives, my mother's people, and that's what I did.

Alex: And how did you do that?

Vern: Oh, I actually saved a little money together and I hitch-hiked from Toronto. And that was difficult at that time, because there was, they didn't have the Trans-Canada Highway. I had to go through the States down through Detroit, that area. I had to go around the Great Lakes. I had to go on Route #2 all the way to south of Regina, then come up that way -- it was quite an adventure, quite a journey.

Alex: Anything humorous happen on it?

Vern: No. I was just, I was very excited when I was crossing the border back into Canada and that was the... That's one thing I remember was them custom people, they weren't going to let me through, because I didn't really have enough money or anything. I told them what I was doing and he said, "You have Indian blood in you, don't you?" And I said, "Yeah." He says, "Well, under the Jay Treaty you have the right to go through." So he let me through. I remember that, I thought that was very important and I was very pleased on that.

And coming into Canada I got excited, because, you know, I hadn't seen my relatives and at that time -- that was in the '50s, early, almost middle '50s, no early '50s I guess, '53, '54 -- and that time reservations, reserves as we call them in Canada -- were very tight. They had Indian Agents, farmer instructors that were called, some were called Indian Agents, and some were called farmer instructors, but whoever were there, they were, they had power. The chiefs and the councillors really had no say, no nothing. That had been taken away from them. And they had... it was very difficult because the Indian agent associated with non-natives, he wouldn't associate with other Indian people -- only on the business. And most of the time these farmer instructors and Indian Agents were ex-R.C.M.P. are ex-provoists. They were Canadian army -- they have a military police are called provosts. So they came from military background and they were usually men who had been in a service and were ex-R.C.M.P., retired are provosts, retired, and so they gave them jobs too. So they were very materialistic and very military-orientated, and they ruled... I remember the Mistawasis Reserve, and I go to my grandma's reserve, Sandy Lake, Star Blanket Reserve and another one, and it was very, they were like concentraton camps in the thick sense of -- where the Indian agent had total control. And they

had health nurses there, and the health nurses were white, the missionaries were white, the Indian agent was white and they all kept to themselves. And they were very parentalistic towards the native people there. I know the style, I know the style. And it was pretty, pretty, it took quite adjusting to...

And then at that time Mistawasis was totally Christianized. There's nobody, except for a few people that would leave back and forth, there were a few medicine people but they were underground; they were actually keeping their ceremonies and stuff underground. And they were taught -- the people in the community who were Christians -- were taught to despise and put down these people. And they were also -- the ones who, who would comply with the Indian farmer instructor, and the missionaries -- they were given favors. And the ones who didn't were... At that time they had a ration system, it was like a welfare but it's called rations, it was a welfare system

-- rations. And if you said anything, or gave the people hard times they were, you know, persecuted. And a lot of times they were doors, I remember some times the door being kicked open by this farmer instructor and Indian Agent. And then they used to like travelling around with the R.C.M.P. for... sometimes with children who weren't going to school... just for minor things, or someone didn't pay a fine, they would kick the person's door down and drag them out. That was the early '50s where none of the people on the reserve had any control of their lives or anything.

And the children were at that time taken away and sent to -- forcefully were taken and sent to boarding school across the country. So there weren't many happy people at that time; when they were happy was in the summertime when the kids would come

home and they would, the kids would run wild all over the reserve, and parents would be happy to see them and everything. That's the only time when, but in the wintertime I was with some older people and they used to practise the old ways, and I learned from them. But they'd do it secretly. This is 19-- when things started to loosen up around 1958, up until then... I would say the '50s, '60s, when they tried to put the White Paper Act through and then the native people countered with the Red Paper, things started to break, things started to change, I noticed that.

Alex: What exactly do these papers say?

Vern: Well, the White Paper was a government -- where they wanted to break up the reserve system and assimilate all Indians into the dominant society. Which, you know, is unrealistic, because in the Canadian society is built, they're built within the Canadian society because... it's came from colonial, it has colonial mentality and had a colonial history. Well, that colonial mentality, that colonial history from England, from the British Empire was... So when they were putting the Canadian Parliament, and Canadian things that had these things part of it, which had formed so... sexism, racism in it. So it's counter-productive for a native person to try to assimilate into something that will, you know, which is bankrupt itself. And... but a lot of native people tried and a lot of native people lost themselves trying.

Alex: And what did the Red Paper mean?

Vern: Oh the Red Paper was, was addressing that the native people are a nation of people. That they have basic human rights, and that they have land claims, and they have a

heritage, and a culture distinct. See, they totally ignore, they say there is two founding nations, they totally ignore the people that were here and are part of this land totally. So that's a false, you know, that's a lie, saying there's two founding nations. And they don't even recognize the original people here.

So the Red Paper addressed that to it. And the Red, just the fact that people questioned the White Paper and looked at the Red Paper -- the whole thing changed. And there are a lot, I have to say, there are a lot of people in the church, and in the government -- not a lot, but there were some, some in the church and in the government realized they'd made a mistake -- that you can't make a Mistawasis a Jones and that it's criminal to do it. And they, a lot of church people, some of them, not all of them, but some of them see the injustice that they were doing to native people in forcing, in ramming Christianity down their throats. And there were government people, because of the Red Paper, realized they were dealing with sovereign nations and should be treated that way. They were a minority, but still... so that the White Paper was defeated. Once in a while people tried to raise that.

Not too many people were aware of that... during the '40s everyone is aware of what happened to the Japanese people. Well, there has been some people, some people of the ruling class within government wanted to do the same thing to the Japanese, they wanted to do the same thing to Indians as the Japanese. In fact there was some army general in the Canadian army was willing to do it -- to take everything away from native people and just make them homeless like the Japanese. But there, I think there were people in there that stopped them from doing it. Harvey, whoever tells that story, whoever talks about that.

And the thing about when people record history, it's the one who does it, this is his story. And so that's why it's very important for native people have control of their education, because, so we can tell our history, our stories. It will be our story -- not their story, but our story. And so it you read... If someone else, when the Europeans talk about our history they say it's their point of view, it's their history but it's affecting us and it's not a true picture.

I see things starting to change in the '60s. And I think a lot to with it is the hippy movement and other things, but just awareness of Indians. See, one of the things that government and the ruling class have been very effective is isolating native people from the rest of Canadians. And when a person is isolated your enemies can do anything to you, and how can you defend yourself because you're in isolation? You call out, who will hear you, because you are isolated? No one can rescue you if you need rescuing because you are isolated. And Indian people, I think we're breaking out of that isolation. I think that... and of course one of the things is retaining our culture, our heritage, and our language. What Indian people are asking for is not privileges but basic human rights: to write, to speak our language, the right to practise our culture, our heritage from our... and the right to our own resources which are still being denied to us. So, you know, I don't see where the Canadian government, and the American government can look at other countries for human rights violations when they violate them every day in Canada, and the United States.

Alex: Getting back to Sandy Lake, your grandmother's reserve. When you say she talked about traditions, what were some of them?

Vern: Well, I used to, the way you learn them the traditional ways, you don't ask a lot of questions -- you sit there and listen and that's the Indian way of teaching and learning. And so I used to just stay with her and I just learn that way. And I watch her, listen to her, and I see her doing ceremonies. I never asked her, I just watched and learned. I record things. And then I watch and I learn that way, and that's what I used to do with her. And she wouldn't -- she could speak English but she wouldn't, so I learned, started to learn my language. That's one way to learn the language is be with the people. And she thought and acted like an Indian person; she learned other of values but she retained her own. And she used to get her pipe out at night and smoke it, give thanks, and I've seen her give tobacco offerings. And anytime she took from the land she always gave something. She was a very beautiful person. And she was very sad, too, in many ways, because she's seen how alcohol has affected her people, and she believed in total sobriety. And a very good person. She lived to a good age. The old people, they had good lives. And it was tough because a lot of the, because they wouldn't go to the churches, and sometimes the agents would cut their rations. The ones who, what I call suck hole to the system, they were given privileges. But see the thing about privileges -- you can be given privileges but they also can be taken away. But when you exercise the basic human rights, like God given rights, no man can take them away from you, you know. But rights mean nothing, mean absolutely nothing if you don't exercise these rights. People must exercise them, that's what people have to understand. Because people will oppress you and then they'll say, "Okay, we're going to take control and we'll give you privileges." And what people always have to remember... And that is what the Indian Act is all about,

saying, "Okay, we'll give you privileges but we take a lot of your basic rights, human rights, away from you."

Yeah, Sandy Lake that's another area of divide and conquer... There, these reserves aren't too far apart. See, people who are oppressing people, they learn from other oppressors. And in the United States when reservations were being made, they had big land bases, and when Canada was dealing with the native people, with our people, is that American government advised them, government and ruling class people.

You got to remember ruling class interlocked with each other, but they use the government to carry out their wishes. People have this false illusion that governments runs things, they're only the tool of the ruling class, whichever has the power and control, they run things, they just use the government to carry out what they do. Sometimes they appoint people within the government, but a lot of time the members of the ruling class are within the government. Sometimes in our, like right now

our Prime Minister is part of the ruling class, but he's also head of the Canadian government. Where in some cases, when Joe Clark was Prime Minister for a short time, he was just privileged -- they allowed him to become, you know, Prime Minister. But he's not part of the ruling class.

But going back to what I was saying, the American government advised, they said, "When you're dealing with the native people in Canada, don't give them a big land base. In fact give them small pieces. And also move them." And that's what they did. A lot of people were moved from one area to another and they were given small land base. And the whole idea was to isolate them and totally surround them by white communities and

assimilate them. They were concentration camps, that's what they were. Now we're into the '80s and a lot of Indian people are fighting to retain their land. See, if you talking about land base Indian people should be getting more land back not less, not less. Our numbers are increasing, our resources are, we need more resources to feed our people; so our land base should be getting bigger not smaller. And the land base is very, very important, because you can, if you have control of your land, you can control the resources.

So the whole question, Europeans didn't come here to Christianize us like some think, they came to take the land -- and they're still doing it. The ancestors of their people who did it, and now they're generation after generations are doing the same thing. So when it comes the Indian wars are starting all over again, and it's the whole question of land again. Because the European will not, for some reason deep inside themselves that they only know, will not share, they will not share. They are, that's part of their culture that lacks, they won't share, they take. They have to control, they have to conquer. When Indian people live on the land we don't conquer it -- we live within the land. That's why we have sweat lodges and things, we go with the land -- our mother the earth. They conquer it. When they climb a mountain they say the conquer it. So a different mentality altogether. And the land thing is too. Our concept was how to share. And that's why we could have slaughtered them, our people were strong at that time, we could have slaughtered them as they came on the beaches. But they didn't because they said there was lots of room. There is still lots of room to share. It's a question of values.

Alex: Who was, when you say you went to this reserve, what was the conditions?

Vern: Oh, missionaries. Like the reserves, that's another divide and conquer tactic is that the churches, and the government, and the ruling classes got together and divided up Indian areas; and said, "This reserve can be Protestant, this reserve, Catholics can have it, Anglican." In some areas in three reserves there, small reserves and land base, they were... one was Protestant; Mistawasis was Protestant; Muskeg, just a few miles away, was Anglican, no, Roman Catholic. The other way, west of there was, not that far away, was Sandy

Lake, Star Blanket Reserve, it was Anglican. So they done the same thing what they did among other places, get the other groups fighting among themselves. It's a colonial mentality, colonial thing is to get people divided and fight among themselves. So it's been very successful, there's even today just like in Ireland they're fighting among themselves, Protestant and the Catholic. And so they brought that sickness and brought it in here. And you see Indians doing that, fighting, Protestant Indians will fight Catholic Indians. And where traditional Indians they respect all, they get along with everybody.

I hear a lot of people saying, "Well, you know, what you talk about Indian way and spirituality and Indian religion is all new to us." And I says, "You know, that's Christianity only been here 400 years, that's new! That's nothing. Our religions, our ways, thousands, and thousands of years." Like I was saying yesterday, you know, I take great pride, and I'm very pleased -- I'm a born again pagan and I exercise that. In fact I want to... I consider myself a traditionalist, I believe in the traditions of my ancestors -- before Columbus got lost and staggered around, and found what he called North America.

See, that's another thing too, is whoever controls education can control the history part. And a lot of, even Indian people today think that everything started when Columbus came. In fact our people, this is where the legends, knowing the legends and that, that gives us directions and insight into our culture and our history. And it was told in the legends -- these are passed down oral stories, oral history being passed down. And the basic truths are kept within the... because a truth has a way of coming up, even if people cover it up, eventually it will come, the light will be so strong the truth will come. That's what truth is, is light, and it will come. And no matter how much people lie and how much they cover eventually the truth will break through the darkness, and that's what lies are not truthful, but the truth is freedom and light.

And what happens is the traditions of the history and the legends are all being told, and being fulfilled. Six hundred years before the Europeans came, legends were told about what would take place. The Hopi and other nations, they've had prophets and healers and everything that give directions to them. But we, as native people, have to remember we have... our languages are the oldest. The European languages have all been changed and everything, they don't, very few... I don't think there's any European languages that's still intact. But the native languages of North America are of the ancient type. The Cree language goes back as a ancient language. So that we have a sense of history, like we know. Most Europeans don't really know where they come from really, very little. But we have direct lines of our ancestors. Like I know as long as I remember my grandfather was a hereditary chief, I can check all the way back, back, back. I think, I did that one time, I can go back 2,000 years. How many people of European ancestry can

say that? Only ones that can say are the privileged few, like the royalty and stuff like that.

And one of the reasons why native people are so oppressed in this country is because they come from a different morality, different code of ethics, different values. And by design the ruling society has developed one where they close people's minds. And where the Indian culture, the Indian society by design opens your minds, raises your level of consciousness. So why would the system, the dominant society system, why would they like us to have a closed mind? Well, very simple, a person with a closed mind is very easy to manipulate, control, and be a consumer; and that's their whole purpose is consuming, that's the society of consumers. And they don't think of the past, they don't think of the future, they think of now -- the consumer. And they don't think of their unborn generations, they just thinking of now, the now generation. They're very selfish, and they know that we're unselfish and it's been used against us.

So that's why another important thing to remember is that if someone commits a crime, what's one of things they do is they get rid of the evidence so it looks like no crimes committed. And that's why there are General Custers and the R.C.M.P. They were at a time when they, and other people tried to wipe us off the face of the earth. Then they could say, "Well, there is no crime committed." Even now Newfoundlanders can't accept the fact that there were Indian people there, they're all gone. They don't say, "Oh, there wasn't anybody here," but they know in their hearts that they're lying, that they wiped them out, they murdered them, wiped them out. But with us they can't do it. As long as there's one holding the pipe, (inaudible).

My own personal feelings have, if Indian people want to assimilate and be Christians, or whatever they want, let them go ahead. I wish them luck. But allow me the integrity, and allow me basic rights as a red man of this hemisphere, not some other hemisphere, but the western hemisphere, a red man of this Turtle Island, allow me the freedom and the right to practice my culture, my heritage, and my religion, and my language the way my ancestors did. That's all I ask, that's all I ask. And if other natives want to be something else -- one of the beautiful things I think in native religion is that in our religions that we forbid anyone who follows our religion to convert someone into our way of thinking. We do not use conversion. Where there's a contradiction with the Christians, they do that forcefully. They have forcefully... history... have converted forcefully, forced people to their way of thinking.

And I think that the many native peoples, especially the youth, they're looking anxiously to retrace their steps. It's just very simple, very practical. If you're going to go somewhere you have to know where you've been. So that's why we have a generation of lost Indians, because they don't know where they've been and they don't know where the hell they're going.

So that's why it's important to focus and look back, not necessarily go back but to look back and see, look at the beautiful value system. How do we put that into today's living? Look at the beautiful tradition. Look at the very beautiful customs. Look at the very beautiful way of living. And then when you sense that, and sense where you come from, and then you can live with the present and look forward to the future. But if you don't know where you've been, and you don't know where you're going, you don't know where the hell you are now. So a lot of it to me, the thing I like about Indian philosophy, everything is simple, simplicity is the very key

thing, where in the dominant society they like to complicate and dissect everything.

Alex: What did you do after you started tracing your roots?

Vern: Oh, I wasn't, I started tracing it but I wasn't that sincere at it. So I went through a lot of things, like most young people go through, looking for something. I didn't really know what I was looking for, so when I found it I didn't really know I had it. That's another thing like we have it within us so it's never really lost, we just have to feed it and make it grow. But no Indian that's born from here has lost it. It's only in our minds -- if we think we've lost it then we have. But if we, all we, it's in us, it's an inheritance that's given to us; but what we have to do is develop it and use it.

So I went through a period of my life where I like to call it like, in a garden, anything worth while to grow in a garden takes a lot of shit, and a lot of manure, but it would grow into something productive. And I went through a lot of shit and manure from the system, and I put myself into a lot of situations where I didn't have to, but it was a learning process -- not a very good one, but I learned. And it was... well I have a final say on it -- I could wither it up, or I can bloom it into something very productive. But I have all the fertilizer that I need, so I went through many things.

And I seen the, all the things of the Indian culture is not romantic as culture. It has a lot of things in it, but it had things in there, good things, and also negative things, just like the dominant society, it's not all bad, but it's certainly not all good. And so people have to learn to look... like,

whether we like it or not, as Indian people we have to deal with two cultures, the culture of our ancestors and the culture of the dominant society; and if we don't we'll be lost in the shuffle. Also, us urban Indians, we have to really deal with realities, the reality that we're -- by our choice we're living in the city. We can leave the city anytime we want, but we're here; so let's get on with it, living in the city. But we don't have to lose our Indianness to do that. There's ways and means of keeping that. And it's also very important that Indian people know their culture in the city, because that would give them a sense of balance, and it would give them a

sense of something to hang onto, and it will help them to deal with other things. So it takes a little extra effort because you're dealing with two cultures. You got to understand both value systems, and then you have to apply yourself to that. Accept some, take some away, you know.

Alex: So you never went to school at all?

Vern: No. I went for a short period of time. I consider my schooling as that I go to the University of the Universe; everything around me is my universe, university. University of the Universe. Everything is connected, everything is learning. So when I'm sitting talking to you I'm learning from you, and you're learning from me.

(END OF SIDE A)

(SIDE B)

Alex: And you were saying about the learning process, learning from each other.

Vern: Yeah, learning from each other, extending ourselves. Education is very important, but we have to understand what the rituals and that mean. So that to do a ritual for the sake of the ritual means nothing, but you have to understand what it means. Learning from each other, learning to share, learning to give of ourselves. When our education system was forcefully taken away from us it broke down. And because another education system was forced on us we were starting to get very poor self images of ourselves. That's why a lot of native people, even today, feel terrible about themselves -- they have no good self image. The only... one gets that from himself and from his people. And my environment is my whole thing is being connected with my people. And people in the sense that are Indian, of blood-line, and people who are following these ways.

And if I see someone I don't think is following the way properly I encourage him but I don't preach to him. I try to set an example or model myself. Recently I've been accepted as an elder and I'm a very young man. But the reason, is interesting to know why, not because I have great knowledge, or because I've done great deeds, like some elders have. But the fact that I try, I try to follow these ways, I try to learn these ways, I try to put these in... And lots of time I come up short, but I try. I try to retain the oral history, I'm trying to keep the language alive, I'm trying to keep the ceremonies alive... So they see that, the elders, my elders. The Ojibway and the Cree, that's the nation I'm... By birthright I'm Cree, but I've worked with Ojibway children and Ojibway people for many years, and I live in their communities. So they recognize this and not by so much what I say -- I can say nice words, but they see what I do. And they see that I honestly try, try to retain this, so they recognize me. And also it's a sense of accomplishment, but it's a sense of

encouragement, they encourage me to excel, they encourage me to even try harder.

So it's very important that I have a good self-image of myself. Not to get self-righteous or anything, but just to feel good about myself. And that's the sad thing about children who go to the regular school system -- they got terrible self-images of themselves. They have no trust in themselves, no trust in their... See, that's why Indians don't trust each other. How can we trust each other if we don't trust ourselves, because we are Indian? Most Indian people I know, they'd rather take the word of a white man before they would an Indian, anytime. In fact the Indian tells him something worthwhile, they got to go check it out with a white person first. I have people coming to me for counselling and I'll counsel them and use things I've learned and I don't preach to them, I counsel them. And they'll turn around, before they act upon it they'll ask a white person, "Do you think this is right?" You know, that's how, when you think of, it can be despairing if you look at it, like, how much we've lost, you know. When you really look at it, it's... sometimes can kind of tug your heart, but on the other hand look how much we have to gain by recognizing these things, and developing them. So I try to look on things from a positive attitude.

I find it's no use, no point, of guilt-tripping white people. It accomplishes nothing, in fact it closes them off. And the other thing is, I don't think it does anything by testifying how much we suffer, we got to get on with it. But I think we have to, you know, have the facts out, for them to speak. But to keep hounding them all over all the time it doesn't... To me, I really deeply believe that as Indian people and our home land, our holy land here, that nothing will get better unless

we make it better. We have to enlighten ourselves, and in the enlightenment we'll maybe enlighten a few non-natives and that will help. We have to remember, too, that the white man himself and the white women are not our enemies, but their system is. And a lot of them are against their own system, you know. So that the white people themselves are not our enemies, but the people in there who practise these ways and oppressing the races or oppressive systems that they create, that's what we're speaking against. That's our enemy -- ignorance and racism -- that's our enemies, not the people themselves. In fact there are some Indian people who are now... have taken that.

I think that capitalism is a very evil thing, very evil. It's only brought destruction to native people, it's never brought anything good. Maybe a few comforts, but not really, you know, it's a very powerful... In the prophecies they talked about these. I've talked to elders for, true elders of the sense... And the prophecies have all predicted these things that would happen, and they are all fulfilling, they are coming through. So it's very important for Indian people to know -- it's like your journey in life; you have to know, learn, and you have to teach yourself. The medicines help us a lot, because we have

natural medicines in this land. Well, we have to be -- to a degree we are our own teachers, we are our own medicine people. But see, we do have native teachers, and we do have Medicine Men and Women; but they're just kind of like a reference point when we need them. They're like -- in the white society we'd call specialists. But ourselves we have to, we help make ourselves get sick, we can help make ourselves get better.

And I've never had any peace of mind, really, until I've got into... I'm at a very... I consider myself like a baby. And when I smoke my pipe I usually have my pipe in a baby's blanket

to remind me I'm a baby at these ways -- I'm just a beginner at this. But at least I'm doing something about it, I haven't given up in despair, I haven't forsaken my ancestors, I haven't said "Oh, you guys are a bunch of old fools and what you had was nothing." I realize they had something really great. But also I think it's important to practise what we teach in a circle. The circle is not complete unless all four colors are in there. See we think of fours not threes, and within there the learning how to get around, getting along with the other races, other nationalities is very, very important. Respect -- that's what the key word is -- respect. I want people to respect me as an Indian, and I want a red man, I consider myself a red man of this western hemisphere, mother Turtle Island, Mother Earth; so then I must respect where someone else is coming from. And then we build principal alliances with each other.

Alex: Did you learn any tribal history?

Vern: Oh yeah. Yeah, I've learned a lot of different customs. See, we are nations, and we have tribes within the nation. But the Europeans tried to say we do not consist as nations, but we do. Only the people can determine who is a nation and who isn't. And Indian people, we were... I belong to the Cree nation, and we have tribes within that nation. We have societies within a society.

We have, we still -- I thank the Creator for it -- we still have some hereditary chiefs left. But most of them have gone so that they could get rations, and get the welfare, and for the government to buy, to build homes for them, a lot of them had to give up their hereditary chiefs, and they took the

elected system. And the elected system can be, not always be, but can be a very corrupt system. And a lot of it has turned into corruption. But I hear there's talk of using a combination of elected and hereditary chiefs starting to take place again. So, in fact I'm looking and finding ways of promoting that hereditary chiefs. I think it's a very good... See, people have to understand that hereditary chiefs -- they were chiefs, but they were servants of the community, servants of the people. And they were taught from childhood to serve the needs of the people, and when they became very elderly, very old, the community and the people who they served all

their lives looked after them, they looked after them. And I think it was a good system.

We have to keep up with the things, but there's also things we should retain. There's things that we should keep, the ceremonies, the rituals are very, very important. Values, Indian values were good 1,000 years ago, they'll be good 1,000 years from now; but how do we put these Indian values... You and me, we're Indians, how do we put our, you know... like we come from a heritage where, an Indian heritage, it's ours and no one can take it away from us. We can only take it away from ourselves, no one can do it to us. We have to remember that they can oppress us, they can even kill us, but they can never crush our spirit, they can never do that. Because it will be born in every new generation. So sometimes it makes, when I hear people say, "I believe in using technology," but when I hear say "Oh, we are elders, or dying, and we got to have everything recorded." That's nice because you can reach a bigger audience, but they'll still be recorded, they'll still be passed on, you know -- orally it will be passed on. They'll never kill off our elders. The moment one dies there's another one being born, and so that, we have to think about that.

It's... sure, modern technology, I think it's very good; but what it does is it, you know, broadens our horizons, it broadens our... we can reach more people. But we can never forget and lose the art of our oral history, our oral teaching -- it's very, very important. We have to learn. See, there's a time coming where... it could be in the near future, when we're not going to have power to hook up tape recorders and stuff, and we got to use and develop, and that's what the Creator gave our minds for -- the most powerful thing we have. And what we need to do is develop our tape recorders in our minds. We've become very lazy. People can't remember other people's names, because they've become very lazy. And they say, oh, they always say, excuse themselves, they say, "Oh, I remember a face but I can't remember a name." Well it's laziness, we've all become lazy. Technology will help us, but it's also, it can be our enemy, too. It's a matter of how we use it. I like to use it; I have my pipe and I use it, I believe in it. But I also believe in a computer, too, and I like the children to learn how to use computers, but I also want them not to neglect their history, their culture, and learn how to look after that pipe. Because that pipe is a communicator -- it taps into the universe of knowledge, it's a instrument, connect it, use it and it will help us. And same as the computer -- use it a good way, good things come -- use it a wrong way, bad things come. So that energies are important, we try to focus on good energies, not bad energies.

Alex: Did you go through any kind of initiation when you became an elder?

Vern: Well, I attended a lot of ceremonies and I think a time will come when I... I hear there's talk where they are going to, kind of, I wouldn't call it, we don't get into

government types of officialism, and bureaucratic. Indian people, thank God, don't get too bureaucratic. But, yeah, there is a time when the community will recognize me -- already people have. Different elders, different groups -- it's not forcing things on people. Some people don't want to recognize me -- fine. You have to accept it, you know. Some probably have, say, "Oh, now Vern now, you know, that's fine." But some have so I have to... What I realize is that it's an honor and it's a privilege. I consider it a privilege for them to recognize me. So I have a responsibility -- I don't want to be a mediocre elder, I want to be a good one. And so I work at my... I don't think I've arrived, I think I've just moved from one level to another level. And I'll keep working and as long as I'm breathing I'll keep learning and I'll keep sharing, keep sharing. And I'll keep doing things.

I think in each community what happens is -- even in these white communities now -- when they see someone doing something, see that's what's important about knowing traditions... Because we never honored our dead -- we honored our dead by struggling and living on. But we didn't wait till they died and say, "Oh, what a great person that guy was." We honored while he was alive, while he was, you know, giving service. We say, "Thank you for your love. Thank you for your caring. Thank you for your hard work." And that would encourage him some more. Sometimes it would even make the person stay longer with us, because some people would be getting weak, and getting ready to go on their journey and their loved ones, and people in the community would say, "Oh, you know, let's recognize this person." I've seen it. I've seen it happen right here in Toronto where a man was getting ready to leave. He was getting discouraged and he was getting weak, and he was feeling good

but he was getting ready to go on his journey and he was sick. Sick from, you know, things in society, the food, and everything. And a group of people got together and honored him, and recognized him. His health has improved a hundred percent, a hundred percent. And he's still working hard and everything, and people are enjoying him more. So, I think, I, you know, I'd like to see that happen to me. Whether it does or not doesn't really matter, but it's just I feel good, and I see the responsibility that I have in front of me. And it encourages me to try harder.

Alex: Did that happen often? (inaudible).

Vern: Oh no, it hasn't happened that much. See there's a lot of clarification going on, you know, who's an elder, what is an elder, a lot of things. Like, it's good, a lot of things -- sometimes some misconceptions come up, but there's a lot of clarifying taking place now, and that's good. There's a lot of people, you know, and a lot of people really looking at what kind of value system are they, you know, looking at. You could have braids and be very dark skinned and your both parents could be full-blooded Indians, but if you have a different value system that changes you. If you picking up someone

else's value system then, you know, you're not practicing -- you're following another value system, and some Indians have done that. I think it's how you put it all together, you combine it all together and then you really have a true sense of who you are. I heard some Indian people say, "Well, I speak my language and I got a treaty number. That makes me, you know, Indian." Well, there's different Indians there's status Indians, non-status, but it doesn't make you a complete Indian. You might speak the language but it's how you use that language, how you use it. And treaty numbers, to me, is really nothing. A few years ago -- Indian Affairs had covered it up

-- but there was, I think, it was forty-six white women that were chiefs across the country -- were elected chiefs and they had no Indian blood in them at all. But under the Indian act they were married to Indians and they became Indians, and I guess they had good qualifications, they got elected as chiefs. But that doesn't make them Indians. They might have the title of Indian Chief, but they're not in the true sense of the word, not Indians. I think, instead of doom and gloom, I think things are looking better, I think good energies, you know.

Alex: When you were traveling out west, how did you do this?

Vern: Oh, when you're young, your relatives take care of you and that's what they did, they took care of me. I was at a very young age -- I needed a lot of protection and the dominant society never gave it to me. But I got it through -- I got an uncle that I love very much -- he allowed me to stay with him and I learned through trial and error and stuff. But I learned how to be a good uncle, and... because he was a good model. Models are very, very important and this uncle was a very good model, very good uncle. So I have nephews and nieces come to me. Who's going to be reading this, or hearing this now?

Alex: Probably anyone who went into the library and asked.

Vern: Well, I've known of people who weren't good uncles, so then the nephews, you know, don't have a good model and it screws them up -- it's very important to have good models. And I'm very fortunate I had a good model, he couldn't have been a better uncle. He taught me a lot of things. He adopted -- it's

very interesting -- he adopted Christianity, but he never forgot his Indian, he kept his Indian values, he put them inside together. And he never tried to make a Christian out of me. In fact, he knew I didn't want to be a Christian. But he lived both ways, and he did it. He's one of the few people I seen able to do it. And he liked to go to church and sing, and I used to join him sometimes. But he never tried to convert me, and he lived true Indian values. He was a very, very good man, very good man. Never judgmental. I think he was one of the few men I've ever seen that really followed the Ten Commandments. He had a wife who was, used to run around, my auntie, used to run around and sleep with a lot of men, and

people used to say, you know, "Get rid of her. You can get anyone else." And he, he never, he loved his wife, and he was faithful to her right to the end, till she died. I know he was a good husband, good father, and in very oppressive conditions, like -- he's on a reserve with very low income, and it was very difficult conditions and yet... he's still living. I see him, I'd like to see him, he's getting ready to go to the spirit world, and I'd like to see him before he goes. And he's been one of my teachers.

That's another very important thing I found in life -- we have to look for teachers. In the Indian way lots of times you have a teacher and you never, you're the student and he's the teacher, or she's the teacher and sometimes you can exchange -- that's the good way of doing it. Sometimes a person's consciousness is such a high level they'll always be the teacher and you're the student. I have a teacher who went to the spirit world who was like that. He was so developed that he knew that he was my teacher, and I knew he was my, I was his student. We never ever verbally said that, but he knew that, he knew. Yeah, I think that's... In the white man's way

everything has to be written down, contracts, and stuff like that, and you're put in your place, you know. But this way, the Indian way, I love that way because the teacher, he was just like me. But he was a teacher and he taught me so many things. And as a student I tried to be a good student. I think that's really important -- trying, trying.

I had a hard time of learning, like I had some sicknesses, mind, physically and spiritually that were on me. So I had a hard time adjusting to Indian doctorings and stuff. But I tried and I was successful. I had a hard time because of my sicknesses to go into sweat lodges. And once I overcame that I loved the sweat lodges, because it's like in my mother's womb, or my mother the earth. And it's also, it opens, it's like being in a womb, opens, it's like being... You can see in the darkness, in fact you see better. When you train your eyes to see in the dark you see better, because there's no, nothing to distract your vision when it's dark. When people learn how to look and see in darkness they see better and more clearer. I think that's why blind people can see so well, they see so clear, they see so, you know... They've developed their senses, they've developed their eyesight. I know most blind people who have really developed their skills, they can see, you know, they don't need...

It's like, it really comes down to our teachings and our things, it's really up to us, it's really up to us. If we want to retain, we want to learn these ways we can do it, nothing is stopping us, only ourselves. But we have to be realistic and we have to be patient, you know. And we can't cram everything into our heads, we have to take our time, learn, and it's discipline. I think the key to it is discipline. Disciplining ourselves. Right now I got some people really doing some

unjust things to me. Well, I got discipline myself not to

retaliate in a negative way. I find that hard, I'd like to go and slap them, but I know that's not right. In fact I'll be adding their power, I'll be making them more negative. And if they want to be that way I'm not going to help them. I want to focus on good energies, good things; try to get a balance within my life.

You see we all, I believe we have both... power is power. It's not good or bad, it's how we learn how to use it. But so we have the final say, we can say, we can do this bad thing or we can decide not to do it -- it's up to us. I've learned to understand what power is about. Power is tapping into energy -- it's not good or bad, it's how we use it, how we learn. So we have that in us, I think we have that in us and we have to learn how to use it. We have, I think that we have good and bad within us, and we have to learn how to use that energy to either way. I've decided to try to be positive, but I recognize negative energy in me sometimes and I try to use it in a productive way, not a destructive way. Because the moment we're born we start dying, you know, it's just a process we got through. So if we feel good we're going to feel bad. And when we have bad energies, what we have to remember when things are bad is that other good energies are around -- we just have to look for them. Also be aware when we have good energies. Then it helps you in life to deal with the peaks and the valleys, because when you're in the peaks, when you're up feeling good, you better remember that and enjoy it because you're going to hit some valleys, too. See the people have a false illusion that you don't suffer. We do, we all suffer; our bodies get painful as they get older. But I believe there's two kinds, maybe there's more, but I understand two kinds of suffering.

One selfishly where we think of ourselves, and then the other kind, the way I've learned through the Indian way, unselfishly where you sweat in a sweat lodge and pray for others, help others to get better, help yourself to get better. You suffer, like heat is hard, but there's good energy in there and you use that energy to doctor yourself. When I'm in the lodge I don't wait for the Medicine Man to doctor me. I get him to help me, but I help myself; I work on my mind, my body, and my spirit. That's why our lodges are very important, very important. And our enemies know that so they try to weaken us, weaken us. By disregarding these things, they're... they are not important. You don't need that pipe, you don't this, you don't need that. Well, if we don't use them then they are not going to be useful. But we use them; they are useful.

Alex: Can you tell me anything about a ceremony at the sweat lodge?

Vern: Oh yeah, the sweat lodge is interesting to know. I like to go back as far as I can. The cultures -- I have a friend who is with the I.R.A. and his ancestors were -- the Irish people had sweat lodges one time. The true Irish people are Gaelic, and they gave up their sweat lodges and that. Us Indians never did. Well, doesn't make us any better than them, but we've kept them. Sweat lodges are, is our learning place,

we can learn in there. It's a very knowledgeable learning place, it's a purifying, purifies ourselves -- our minds and everything. And it's... I don't think a native person, if he really wants to learn his culture, can learn without experiencing the sweat lodge. In some native groups they have some other form or way -- not all have sweat lodges. But they have some other way of educating and teaching. And it's up to us to find these things, it's up to us to use them.

Alex: Why I ask you is so someone listening to this wouldn't understand exactly what the significance of the sweat lodge is.

Vern: Yeah, it's a purifier and it's a learning process, and it's a healer -- it's many things. The only way to really do is to seek out credible people who, you know, used these in a... You check their credentials and find out what kind of people are. And then you find a way to present yourself and use that sweat lodge. You know, it's there for people to use. I'm surprised, a lot of Indian people don't use them. I know a white man who uses one out west. He's one of the first white men I've ever known that used the sweat lodge. A lot of the Indian people they won't go because he's there, but a lot of Indian people do go, and a lot of white people go. I have an opportunity to go to his lodge, I go. I go because, not because he's white or because he's this or that, I go because he conducts that. And he's conducting good energies and good things, so I go there, and I get good things out of it. I always feel better when I come out of there.

But people who want to learn these things, they have to seek it. And you get lessons for that, and the more effort you make into it the more you go with the trouble, see that we've been spoiled so we want everything, especially us city Indians and people who go to universities. University people are very spoiled, very soft, very spoiled and they want everything handed to them. And if it's not handed to them they don't think it's worthwhile. So, but, you know, that's their problem. I find that you seek -- you go out -- and you get blessings for that. The more effort, the more suffering you go

through to find something. It's like if you think you've lost something and you find it, you rejoice in it and you make sure you don't lose it. And that's what a lot of us Indians are doing, we thought we lost something but we didn't really, so we went seeking for it. And then when we realized that we hadn't lost it, well, we protect it more. I protect my culture more, and I promote it, but I protect it. I love it and I protect it. I see how meaningful it is, you know. Contemporary Indian living Toronto, how meaningful. I think it keeps me, it helps me to raise my consciousness but it also... it prevents a sense of balance... it gives me a sense of balance, and it prevents madness completely taking over me. Because you see in the cities, not just Indians, but many non-Indians, you know, losing their minds. I walk the streets in Toronto here -- and I like walking, it's very spiritual for me, it's very disciplined for me, my mind, my body, and my spirit. And I see

people losing their minds everyday on the streets, the subways, all over, because they have nothing to balance them, nothing within their... And men and women need balance -- that's what keeps us together.

Alex: You went through a lot of troubles just to find out (inaudible)?

Vern: Oh yeah. Yeah, sometimes we can be our worst enemies. I was exposed to a lot of things, but I wasn't that concerned. Well, it's a good thing I recorded things in my mind and so I have them. That's the important thing to do -- process them. Then when you need them you'll have them. But see, that's why I believe in educating native children in a good way. Give them tools to work with and it's up to them to use it or not. But there's a lot of native people are going, the young with the complex society and they don't have no tools

to work with. So no wonder they don't, you know, they can't really amount to anything, because not in the white man's world, but in the Indian world you got to have tools to work with. And you got to have a good self-image of yourself, you got to feel good about yourself. I believe any child -- regardless if they're white, yellow, black, or red -- that if they feel good about themselves they're going to be able to accomplish anything. So Indian children need to prepare. See, as a parent now and as a grandfather -- I'm a grandfather, I have grandchildren -- I don't think my job is so much to educate my children. My main job is to protect them. And one way to protect them is with their culture and their heritage, that's the way to protect them. Good way, best way I know is to introduce them to that. It's very difficult because a lot of us have, a lot of us, my age and older, they say, "Oh, it's too late." You know it's never too late, never too late. If we think it's too late then we're deceiving ourselves. We can learn all the time, as long as we breathe we can undo things that were done to us. We can relearn, we can learn things that we never learned before. Everyday I think I learn something new, or I get a chance to remember something I forgot, or I get a chance to practise something. You know, I really enjoy life. It's, you know, sometimes it's a hassle dealing with people and everything, but that's what makes us strong, that's what keeps us going.

Alex: Do you like it in the city here?

Vern: Oh well, yeah I like it, I'm spoiled. (chuckles) I like it. And I get out in the country when I can, but I like it, it's very convenient. I like -- Toronto is a good place that I consider... if you're going to live in the city I think Toronto is a good place. You got transportation is really, you

know, I can get all over the city by transportation. It's, you know, we're soft. I now admit it that I'm soft, but I'm toughening myself up; I'm, you know, disciplining myself more. In fact I'm spoiled. I take a bath sometimes twice, three

times a -- especially in the hot weather -- three times a day. Well, that would be very difficult in the bush, when you are away from water and stuff, and you got to dig it up out of the ground, or go down to a lake, you know, it's not... they're worse and worse, you know. People are in cities because they want to be in cities.

But also I get on with my job. I have a job to do here and I'm going about doing it. And so I don't... I found it very important to put your mind and body and spirit together. If your body is here, and your spirit is here, and your mind is somewhere else, you got problems. A lot of Indians, and a lot of people, they might be here in body, but their mind somewhere else. And I had to practise myself. I was in a place, but my mind was here, my body was there and my spirit was there, but my mind was over here. I had to put them all together, so what I did, I brought my body and my spirit down to Toronto and connected with my mind. I could have done it the other way, but I didn't want to do it. There was something here. I wanted to be here so I came here. And I find that's really important. So that, you know, us urban Indians, if we're going to be in the city, we got to take the good times with the bad times, because we, you know, we got to, we can't cry about the bush. If we want to go in the bush then go in the bush, you know. Say, "Oh, I can't stand the city." Then what the hell are we doing in the city? If we're going to be in the city let's get on with it.

One of things I'd like to share with is my hair. See, hair is very important to us, and I follow, I'm learning to follow my religion and my hair is sacred. I don't cut it, I keep it long, and I braid it and that helps me. How does it help me? You see, because under that concrete my mother's hair, the grass, is there -- my mother's hair, sweetgrass, is under there. And hair, my mother's hair is there; now if they didn't keep paving that, my mother's hair would come through. And so I know, because I braid my hair like the sweetgrass, sweetgrass is a sacred grass where our mother... it's the hair of our mother. It's cut and braided, and it's used to purify when you light it. We purify our thoughts. Try to get good energies. Well, it's cut and so my hair is braided like a braided sweetgrass; so when I walk on the concrete I know with my hair and I feel, I feel my mother underneath me. I feel sad for her but at this time I can't do anything. But I recognize her and so she recognizes me. She says, "Oh, there's my son, he don't tramp." I don't walk heavy -- I used to when I was younger and angry, I used to walk heavy. And my uncle noticed the change in me. He says, "You walk softly now, you walk gentle, you become a very gentle man." I'm still a fighter, I fight for my rights, but I'm a gentle person and I like being a gentle person. And so I'm gentle, and I walk on the concrete gently. And my mother recognizes me and says, "Oh, there's my son, one of my sons." And I feel that, I feel a connection. So it helps me to cope with my surroundings around me. It makes me feel that I can cope within the city.

But I believe that a time will come when we will have to leave the cities, I believe that will come. And I believe that there will be a nuclear war, and we'll survive it. Well, regardless if we survive it or not we have to prepare ourselves in our own

journeys in life. We are not just here taking up space and that, we are here for a purpose and we have to get on with it. Like, many Indians you don't hear. I'm one of the few that talk about it, but the old people and some of the elders they believe in reincarnation. I believe in it. And we keep coming here until we accomplish our mission that we've come for. And once we do that I believe we go to another consciousness in another form, it goes on, and on, and on. So that's why in life it's important to try to have a good journey. This is my own way of thinking. Why do we try to be good every day? Why do we try to be good to ourselves and others, and be good people? Well, to me it's common sense, because when I leave -- I could leave today, now -- how I leave is that is how I'm going to go. So if my mind and my spirit are down and I'm in conflict, that's the way I'm going to go on my journey. So it's important for me to, when I'm, because I never know. I never knew when I was coming in and I don't know when I'm leaving, but it's important how I leave so that when I do leave my journey will be a good journey. That's why we pray when someone leaves; we rejoice for them, because they've gone on their journey to another dimension. And we ask they have a swift journey there and they have a good journey, wherever they're going. And I believe if our minds are mixed up, confused, and tormented, that's the way our journey will be. One of the teachings I do with the children is very simple, is if... I tell them, "If you're going..." And I apply this to myself -- if I'm going to go from Toronto to Sudbury what do I do? I make sure I'm well prepared. I get my ticket ahead of time -- I don't wait till the last moment. I get my ticket and I get things I need. If I want a pillow, no matter how, you know, depends how I prepared, if I really prepare I'll have a really, really nice trip. If I don't prepare I could have a miserable trip. And I've applied that simple philosophy to life.

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