A Journey towards Indigenous Knowledge in Social Work Practice:

A Research Practicum at Sturgeon Lake Health Centre

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ABSTRACT

This research practicum report explores the story of a spiritual journey that occurred alongside my learning during a research practicum at Sturgeon Lake Health Centre. My experience showed me that I had a lot of deep spiritual healing and balancing to do. The journey is about reconciling the physical reality with the spirit. In this report I explore who I am as a highly sensitive person and as a sentient being. I explore the epiphany moments I experienced on my journey. Those moments occur when knowledge becomes knowing based on experiential knowledge. To explore this, I use the autoethnographic method of storytelling. The epiphanies are a result of “value walking”, which is a technique that helped me to balance my physical being and my non-physical or spiritual being. I moved from a deep-seated set of Western values, which places more emphasis on the physical reality, towards Indigenous values, which focuses on the spirit. I compare my spiritual journey with the journeys of three others and find many similarities. Spiritual journeys are healing. In this report, I explore how my experience of healing is applicable to social work as it relates to competency as a helper.
I want to acknowledge the support of my family through this journey of change. Thank you for believing in me and for your support through the most challenging moments along the journey. I want to show my gratitude to teachers Willie Ermine, Norma Rabbitskin, Philip Auger, Rose Daniels, and Mike Daniels. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my Academic committee including Dr. Raven Sinclair and Dr. Donalda Halabuza.

I want to thank the community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation, the land, and all the ancestors that trusted in me and shared Indigenous knowledge. It is Indigenous teachers and the community that allowed for such a deep healing experience.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This report details the experience of a spiritual journey in a practicum placement. The definition of spiritual is “of, relating to, or consisting of spirit” (Dictionary.com, 2018, def 1) and the definition of journey is “passage or progress from one stage to another” (Dictionary.com, 2018, def 4). I have actively pursued spiritual development since 2011, so my journey began long before this report. However, this stage mirrors the other stages I have gone through in that it is a process of knowledge becoming experience.

This report is about a spiritual path of reconciling the physical and non-physical aspects of the self. To do this, I journeyed from the Western worldview and values towards an Indigenous worldview and values. It begins with an introduction and review of my practicum placement and the community I worked with, who I am, and the purpose and objectives of the research practicum. Next, the report looks at the literature on highly sensitive people because I am a highly sensitive person working with highly sensitive people in a sensitive culture. It also reviews literature on Indigenous worldview and values and Western worldview and values to explain to the reader the two points on the spiritual journey. Following that is the methodology section. The methodology used is autoethnography because it focuses on personal stories and accountability to research aimed at bettering the world. This section reviews the history of autoethnography, the core principles, the methods, and the ethical considerations. The findings section is where the art of storytelling in fairy tale is used to disclose the findings or the experience of the journey. To discuss these findings, I review the similarities between my spiritual journey and the journey of three others. Also, I look at how these findings pertain to social work as it relates to the social work value of competency. The final section provides three recommendations, two of which pertain to social work and one of which pertains to personal
work I need to continue. This report is about journeying to Indigenous knowing and concludes with a review of what has been discussed in the report.

The framework used in the journey is the process of knowledge becoming knowing or experiential knowledge. This process is discussed by Indigenous scholars such as Manulani Aluli-Meyer (2010) and Willie Ermine (2011). Through this process I created more balance between the physical and the non-physical, or spiritual, aspect of myself. How this played out is a personal journey of walking from Western worldview and values, which place more value on the physical, to Indigenous worldview and values, which place more value on the spiritual. This report details my experience in a research practicum at Sturgeon Lake First Nation.

The introduction explores details of the practicum placement and the community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation. Next, I situate myself in my work through the process of reflexivity, which is a method of autoethnography. Locating the self also aligns with Indigenous knowledge and research (Baskin, 2011). To conclude the introduction, I review the research practicum objectives and how I met those objectives.

**Practicum Placement**

For my Master of Social Work Research Practicum, I collaborated with Sturgeon Lake Health Clinic to learn more about spiritual disconnection. My research practicum took place at Sturgeon Lake Health Clinic and at Lloyd Johnson Memorial Healing Lodge, from September 7, 2016 to April 28, 2017. Lloyd Johnson Memorial Healing Lodge is a lodge at Sturgeon Lake First Nation where traditional healing medicines are housed and ceremonies take place.

During the practicum I researched Indigenous worldview, natural laws, cultural teachings, and “highly sensitive people” to meet the objective of creating programming with and for First Nation people in the community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation. The program
A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

*Mamāhtāwisiwin* (of a spiritual nature, giftedness) which is a part of Sturgeon Lake *Kwayaski*

*Pimātisiwin* (ways of proper life): Restoring and Re-affirming Community Strengths Traditional Mental Health Approach was created many months after the research practicum.

“High sensitivity” is an inherited temperamental trait that allows people with this trait to engage in the subtle world around them, be more empathetic, and be more aware of their own thoughts and feelings. This is discussed in more detail in the literature review section of this report. The realization that I worked with many people who are “highly sensitive” at Sturgeon Lake First Nation emerged after the practicum was completed. My involvement with the community began in 2015 and has continued past the research practicum period.

In 2015 I began coming into the community of Sturgeon Lake and working with clientele who were seeking counselling from a holistic perspective. They were grieving due to loss, and were dealing with aspects of sensitivity and the subtle world around them. Years of relationship building prior to my practicum allowed for this research practicum to occur. My experiences with Sturgeon Lake allowed for the development of relationships with the community, the families, the staff, the land, and much more. It allowed me to observe and learn, build trust, and demonstrate respect for the community’s values, culture, and their stories. Through collaboration we created an ethical safe space to learn and grow. Caring for a relationship with the people of Sturgeon Lake First Nation allowed for the deep experience through this research practicum.

The community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation is located North West of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. When you enter the community, you are greeted by images of medicine wheels and a community convenience store. The community is situated along a winding narrow lake named Sturgeon Lake. The land is rolling and filled with evergreen trees and natural bush. There are houses both in small communities on the land and amongst the trees. There is a healing
lodge, a clinic, a school, a youth centre, an RCMP detachment, a main office, and other
bUILDINGS. Sturgeon Lake is a special community that integrates tradition with modern day living.
Much of the culture is maintained in individual homes and in community organizations. This is
evident in the cultural art and images of history, ceremonies, and the smell of sage and
sweetgrass in the halls of these organizations. There are many initiatives in the community that
are geared toward health and well-being with culture and tradition. There are special people at
Sturgeon Lake. The Indigenous worldview is strong in the community. This may be influenced
by the fact that there are many knowledge keepers and strong Elders at Sturgeon Lake First
Nation. I saw many instances that showed me the people at Sturgeon Lake are open-minded,
strong-willed, kind, and supportive. It is a place some leave, and many return to. It is a place
where you see smiling faces and feel welcome. I owe many thanks for the strengthening of my
own well-being to this community, and I feel honored to support such an amazing group of
people. I am fortunate to be working with the staff at Sturgeon Lake Health Centre.

The community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation took over the community health services
in 1995. The vision statement of the clinic is “Building a healthy community through our
customs, values, and traditions under the guidance of our Elders.” (Sturgeon Lake First Nation,
2018).

Sturgeon Lake Health Centre provides acute care and wellness programming to those
residing at Sturgeon Lake First Nation (Sturgeon Lake First Nation, 2018). The centre is unique
in that it integrates Elder guidance and Cree healing values and practices with the medical model.

The centre provides an array of holistic programming including:

- Physical health (nursing, dental therapy, prenatal program, wellness checkups,
  recreation programs, water quality)
- Emotional health (NNADAP, mental health therapy, crisis counselling, men’s & women’s talking circles, referral services, elders counselling)
- Spiritual health (elder services, traditional ceremonies, cultural teachings, pipe ceremonies)

Mental health services include all existing health programs, men’s circles, traditional parenting, women’s awareness group, traditional/cultural workshop (Sturgeon Lake First Nation, 2018, para. 4). Lloyd Johnson Memorial Healing Lodge collaborates with the Health Centre to provide traditional healing. This centre was built by the late Lloyd Johnson. His vision for building the centre was to provide a space for traditional practices to occur. This centre is managed by the professional associate for this research practicum. The programs that operate in the lodge provide culture and ceremony, and traditional healing medicines. These programs allow for alternative health care in the community. The success of the healing lodge has been abundant, and its grand opening occurred only a half a year ago. The healing lodge is where I learned most of the experiential knowledge during my practicum. The next section will focus upon information about the writer of this report.

**Practicum Objectives**

During my research practicum, I read extensively about Indigenous knowledge and worldview; I took part in many ceremonies at the healing lodge including sweats and pipe ceremonies; and I spoke with Elders, knowledge keepers, Oskâpêwis (elder’s helper), and community members about our connection with the whole of creation and the distraction from connection.

The objectives for the research practicum included:
• to dismantle my assumptions, biases, and resistance about First Nations people, their cultural and spiritual practices, and worldview;
• to acquire knowledge of what the Indigenous worldview is and how this informs social work and mental wellness practice; and,
• to assist individuals experiencing mental, emotional, and/or spiritual disharmony.

**Objective 1: Dismantling My Assumptions and Biases**

The first step on the journey was dismantling my assumptions and biases and learning Indigenous knowledge. In the beginning, I picked up pieces of knowledge—Indigenous knowledge. I read, watched, and connected with Indigenous leaders about the shared history of First Nations People and non-First Nations People, and Indigenous culture, spiritual practices, and worldview. The process of dismantling biases toward First Nations people, culture, and worldview was valuable because I started to learn the value of Indigenous knowledge. Also, I learned how this worldview is shared across the world by many cultures, religions, and disciplines.

I read about Eastern mysticism, religious texts, quantum physics, energy psychology, and new age spirituality, among other topics. The purpose of looking at these texts from various locations and disciplines was to find knowledge that is like First Nations cultural knowledge. I found many similarities. Ross (1989), an Indigenous professor from Colorado, discusses these similarities in detail in his book titled *Mitakuye Oyasin: “We are all Related”*. Reviewing texts from different disciplines helped me realize Indigenous knowledge is not associated with race but is found across the world and it exists in cultures before time (Boulter, 2009). Reviewing cultural knowledge helped me decrease my biases of First Nation culture and
strengthen my respect for First Nation culture and people. Up to this point, much of my effort was on attaining knowledge. Yet, that was about to shift.

**Objective 2: Knowing How Indigenous Knowledge Informs Mental Wellness**

In the next phase, understanding what Indigenous worldview is and how it informs mental wellness practice started to take form through experiential knowledge. I began to take part in the community. I set up meetings with different people and groups, such as the youth centre and the school director. I attended a conference on First Nation wellness as an ally of Sturgeon Lake Health Centre. I attended ceremonies (sweat lodge, pipe ceremony, healing and teaching circle, and more). In my daily life I incorporated practices including smudging and using tobacco. This is when the experiential learning truly began.

Learning through experience allowed me to make the correlation between wellness and Indigenous worldview and culture and create knowing by putting it into action. I thought I was doing well before the research practicum, but I had much healing to do. It was a humbling experience. Experiential learning made me realize how little I knew and how little I had to gain from reading and watching. Realizing this allowed me to experience firsthand how Indigenous worldview and practices create wellness in the community and in me.

**Objective 3: Helping Others with the Knowledge Gained**

As I learned more about the trait of sensitivity, it became clear that many of those who I worked with at Sturgeon Lake First Nation are highly sensitive. I wanted to share the knowledge gained with those at Sturgeon Lake. If my personal journey of the correlation between high sensitivity and Indigenous worldview has been positive, I reasoned that the knowledge might be valuable for highly sensitive people at Sturgeon Lake as well. At the end of my practicum, my professional associate for this practicum began to formulate a plan of how to bring about
wellness in the youth at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. This program was approved and is set to continue for the next four years. It is called Kwayaski Pimâtisiwin, which means “ways of proper life” in English.

Under the umbrella of Kwayaski Pimâtisiwin, my professional associate and I taught about strengthening sensitivity in a person through experiencing Indigenous worldview, values, and culture. This plan allowed me to fulfill the final objective of assisting individuals experiencing mental, emotional, and/or spiritual disharmony. This final phase was about accountability. Once knowledge is known, it must be shared. I am grateful I had the opportunity to give back knowledge gained to the youth at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. This research practicum was also fulfilling because it allowed me to grow personally. It allowed me to discover more about who I am.

**Reflexivity**

The following section on reflexivity shows readers who I am. This method is important in both Indigenous research and autoethnography methodology. Qualitative research operates from the principle that all research is subjective. If all research is subjective or affected by the personal, understanding the person behind the research is important. It allows readers to understand why the research was conducted and the outcomes that were found.

Indigenous methodology rejects one truth (Cajete, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Dunbar, 2008). There are many individual truths. This idea is reiterated by Dr. Larry Dossey in his book titled *One Mind*. Dossey (2013) quotes Simon Ortiz from the Acoma Pueblo tribe who says there is no such thing as truth, there are only stories. Our stories illustrate where we come from and whom we come from. Knowledge of those stories is important in both Indigenous knowledge and research, and autoethnography methodology.
Autoethnography, which is discussed in greater detail in the methodology section, also interests itself with revealing the complex subjective world of a researcher’s thoughts, feelings, stories, and experiences (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2014; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Bochner, 2016; Elis & Bochner, 2014). Autoethnography asks the writer to use the method of reflexivity. Reflexivity, or the act of self-reference, asks us to consider how our identities, experiences, and relationships influence our present work as well as it acknowledges our research in relation to power (Adams et al., 2014). We must know ourselves if we are to look at ourselves in relation to power. We must observe how our hidden values and intentions control our behaviours (Ermine, Sinclair, & Brown, 2005). The process of shining a light on our hidden values and intentions is challenging because we must be authentic and honest with ourselves.

The process of extensive self reflection, questioning, and breaking down beliefs to uncover hidden values is a powerful technique. It is full of challenge, disbelief, shame, guilt, and finally a deep sense of calmness and freedom. It helps me reconcile the disagreements between my physical and non-physical self. Here, I look at my physical self in relation to power and privilege, I look at the creation of my mind by reviewing my ancestral lineage and upbringing, and I explain my journey of growing to who I am today.

**My Physical Reality**

I am a 31-year-old Caucasian married woman with children living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I have many privileges because of the colour of my skin. In investigating my privileges, I see many blatant and subtle examples of the privileges I receive and perpetuate. For example, as a Caucasian mother, I can carry a backpack into a store and I am not followed, and I do not experience workers questioning my intentions. I never wonder if my race has something to do with a negative situation that occurs. I grew up with no hurdles because of my race.
Because of how I grew up, I did not even question race as a form of privilege, until I entered university.

Because I am a Caucasian thin woman, I am viewed a certain way because of the way I look. When I search beauty, the first page of Google tells me I am close to beautiful. I need to cover my skin with make up and remove all my body hair, and then my status increases. Yet, my status in this state fails in comparison to a Caucasian man. Caucasian men are at the top of the dominant hierarchy that is created from patriarchy.

In an interview with one of the most successful investors in the world Warren Buffet discloses that he is one of the richest persons in the world because he is a white male (Weisenthal, 2013). Certain genders, colours of skin, and physical abilities and attributes receive privileges from societal systems. I accept that these inequalities exist in every facet and every social system in our life. And once we acknowledge these systems, we can work together to change them as they keep all of us in chains, including those of us who appear to benefit from them. I have discussed my physical reality in relation to power and privilege; now I will explain the formation of my mind.

My mind is always forming from the minds that come before me as well as from the bundles of knowledge and knowing along my journey here. If that is true, then a look at my ancestral background is of value to the reader. I am not Indigenous to this land. My father is German and Yugoslavian. My grandfather’s family immigrated to Treaty Six territory in the early 1900s. My Yugoslavian ancestors originate from the Slavic People. Both Slavic and Jewish people endured genocide during World War II. The most commonly used symbol in Slavic culture is the kolovrat, which represents the spinning wheel of wellness which is akin to the First Nation medicine wheel. The kolovrat represents wholeness, cosmic order, and the four directions
My mother is English, Scottish, German, and Yugoslavian. My great-great-grandmother was born from nobility and was exiled from England due to relations with a man of lower class. My Scottish ancestors on my grandfather’s side held nobility stature in Scotland where a family castle still resides. Descendants of these Scottish ancestors migrated to these lands and lived in the United States. They fought First Nations Peoples and Standing Bull in the battle with Custer McLean.

My ancestors contributed to the taking of land by force in what is now called the United States. Both sides of my family acquired land in Treaty Six Territory and continue to farm that land with Westernized farming practices. There is no history of children being removed from parents, so all children grow up learning parenting skills from the family members that raised them. The acquiring of land and not being removed from parental care because of race are a few of the privileges of my ancestors who were colonizers of this land.

Reviewing my heritage brings about feelings of pride and feelings of disgrace. I cannot change the past. I can only accept it. I move forward in my life respecting the whole of my ancestors’ lives here and learning from their journeys. Both the good and the bad are bundles of knowledge if I choose to view them as such. There is a great deal of power in knowing what not to do. Next, I explain my childhood and two big changes in my life that affected who I am.

**My Upbringing**

I was raised in rural Saskatchewan in a farming community made up of people of mostly German heritage. I was always surrounded by family on both my mom’s side and my dad’s side. My dad was a farmer who worked with my other relatives, and my mom worked at the school I attended from kindergarten to grade 12. The school had 140 children attending when I went to school and all 140 children were Caucasian. Our school was your typical Westernized school and
was dominated by male influence. These factors contributed to my learned behaviour of comparing and competing.

I am the oldest of three children. I had a positive upbringing, one I view as better than good enough. I always felt safe. The challenge of my upbringing was being rushed. As a child, I took many moments in solitude to balance being rushed. My memories are about being outside: playing with my siblings, making snow forts or forts in the field, sitting with the birds by the grain bins, and laying with my childhood dog in the trees.

My world collapsed when I attended university. The veil of blissful ignorance came down because I learned about systems that perpetuate injustices. These systems allowed me privilege and caused others to suffer. I fought against these injustices but now I know that fighting against past injustices does not heal them. I took on an anti-oppressive framework in a reckless manner in the sense that I did not do the inner work and just continued to fight against the outer environment. This fighting against my outer world without doing the inner world work resulted in burnout, but burnout was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

The collapsing due to burnout made way for new ideas to take shape in my mind and in my physical reality. I took some time to do some searching in the realm of personal and spiritual development. At this point in my journey, spirituality was mostly knowledge—an idea in my outer world; yet it is the vehicle that brings me to experiential learning of who I am as a spiritual being.

I have come to know my spiritual being as the whole of creation manifesting through me into this physical reality. I learned this through an Indigenous way of being. The Indigenous way of being gifted me with experiential learning. The elders and knowledge keepers from Sturgeon
Lake and the ceremonial practices assisted me through an inward journey, a journey of the spirit, a journey that is rarely discussed let alone promoted in Western society.

Here, I reflected on my ancestral background and some major details illustrating who I am today. I used an autoethnographic method of reflexivity. In this section I sought to locate myself. I reviewed my physical identity and how that relates to power. I looked at my mind and how my upbringing and my ancestral background has shaped me. I illustrated my new journey of spirit and how my relationship with the community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation assisted me in the beginning of this inward journey. This all occurred in a research practicum where I attempted to meet certain practicum objectives.

In this section, I discussed how I fulfilled the research objectives of dismantling my assumptions and biases about First Nations people, culture, and worldview; understanding what Indigenous worldview is and how it informs mental wellness practice; and sharing the understanding of wellness with others. I reviewed the details of the practicum, the community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation, and the Sturgeon Lake Health Centre and the Lloyd Johnson Memorial Healing Lodge. Reflexivity was highlighted to explain who I am as a physical, mental, and spiritual being. This allows readers to understand what brought me to my purpose and objectives for the research practicum. The next chapter will focus on the literature on “highly sensitive” people in order to provide understanding of the concept and to make the connection between a western interpretation of high sensitivity with Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and to articulate how this understanding provided a framework for my own personal and professional social work development.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Highly Sensitive People

This section reviews literature on being “highly sensitive”, as well as Western worldview and values, and Indigenous worldview and values. The reasoning for reviewing literature on high sensitivity is that I discovered that my experience of the world was best defined by being highly sensitive, and I subsequently found that this definition fits well for the people at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. I review the difference between the Western worldview and values and Indigenous worldview and values because both are points on my spiritual journey. First, I review literature on being highly sensitive that includes biological research, that is, how an individual’s upbringing affects those with the trait, and four main psychological characteristics of the trait of high sensitivity.

The literature uses several acronyms in discussions of high sensitivity. For example, HSP is the acronym for highly sensitive person (Aron, 2016). I attempt to move away from the acronyms and labels for two reasons. First, labels place people in specific boxes and there are many variations and varieties that make up an individual. Second, sensitivity is a trait that can be influenced, increased, or decreased depending on social factors such as the family and society. For these reasons, I do not capitalize highly sensitive and I do not use the acronyms.

The literature search reveals no research before the 2000’s on sensitivity. Literature prior to 2000 discusses sensitivity variances between cultures, sexes, and environmental sensory sensitivity as it relates to developmental disabilities. There is no early research on the trait because it was coined in 1997 by Dr. Elaine Aron of Pacifica Graduate Institute. Dr. Elaine Aron is the key informant regarding the area of high sensitivity. I find that others researching this topic...
use her work as the foundation of their study. The starting point for the literature review is an examination of the biological research of high sensitivity.

**Biological Research about High Sensitivity**

Pluess and Belsky (2013) focused on the biological strengths of sensitivity. They stated, “[w]e embrace and promote the term vantage sensitivity to describe the notion that some individuals are more sensitive and positively responsive to the environmental advantages to which they are exposed” (p. 903). It is a genetic trait of 15-20% of the population of various species (Aron, 2013; Aron, 2016). There are two major studies that associate high sensitivity with genes. Licht, Mortensen, and Knudsen (2011) found an association between sensitivity and the “5-HTTLPR short/short genotype, or with 5-HTTLPR short allele carrier status…found in the serotonin system” (p. 12). Also, Chen, Chen, Moyzis, Stern, He, Li, Li, Zhu, and Dong (2011) looked at all genes with alleles that affect the dopamine system. What they found was 10 polymorphisms that made statistically significant contributions to HSP (Chen, et al., ph 1). Ten genes predicted a greater chance of being highly sensitive (Chen et al., 2011).

Aron, Aron, and Jagiellowicz (2012), and Pluess and Belesky (2013) discuss sensitivity as an advantage and show evolutionary biological evidence. Acevedo et al. (2014) state that “these more sensitive organisms have an enhanced awareness of opportunities (e.g., food, mates, and alliances) and threats (e.g., predators, loss of status, competitors), and thus may be more ready to respond to emerging situations” (p. 1). Biological responsivity was found in over 100 species of animals (Aron, 2016).

Evidence of this trait is found in the brain and nervous system. The human nervous system is a network of nerves and cells that carry information from the brain and spinal cord to parts of the body. Those who have a more sensitive nervous system take in more information and
process more information compared to non-sensitive counterparts (Aron, Aron, & Jagiellowicz, 2012).

When being monitored with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), those with the sensitivity genetic trait show elevated activity in the insula (Aron, 2013). The insula is found in the cerebral cortex and its functions include self-awareness, perception, and cognition. Acevedo et al. (2014) studied the neural correlates of 18 sensitive people that viewed photos of their romantic partners and of strangers displaying positive, negative, or neutral facial expressions. The scores of sensitive people were associated with an increase in brain activity in regions reflecting awareness, empathy, and motor control in response to others’ emotions. If not overwhelmed by stimuli, those with high sensitivity are very aware and empathetic.

The sensitivity trait results in more awareness of environmental stimuli. This trait affects activity in regions of the brain involving attention and action planning (Acevedo et al., 2014). The positive effect of responsivity is paying more attention to details and then using the knowledge to make better predictions; the negative effect is sometimes deep processing wastes energy and subsequently overloads the nervous system (Aron, 2016). Those with the sensitivity trait adopt a method of pausing to check, observe, and reflect on what they are seeing before acting (Aron, 2016). Positively, this ability can result in fruitful outcomes; negatively, it can result in indecisiveness. The type of upbringing of an individual plays a large role in their ability to manage sensitivity.

The Effect of Childhood on Sensitivity

In psychology, high sensitivity was strongly associated with neuroticism in studies from the early 2000’s (Aron, 2016). Yet, some feel there are underlying factors that contribute to the correlation between neuroticism and sensitivity. In 2005 Elaine Aron found that this correlation
is affected by the childhood environment of an individual (Aron, 2016). Those with good-enough childhoods were at no more risk than others; in fact, those with the sensitivity trait proved to be slightly happier and healthier than those without the trait (Aron, 2016). “Neuroticism” is impacted by childhood upbringing; however, the culture or society we live in impacts definitions of neuroticism.

Research shows that the general population in the Western part of the world associate introversion with poor mental health, and 70% of highly sensitive people are introverted (Aron, 2016). Those with the trait naturally observe before acting. This way of being has resulted in mislabels such as “inhibited” or “shy” (Aron, 2016). This labelling gives sensitivity a negative tone (Aron, 2016). Yet, cultures that value and promote sensitivity research this trait in a positive light; for example, Japan, Sweden, and China expect sensitive subjects to perform better, and they do (Aron, 2016). Here, we discussed the impact of childhood and society on the psychology of the sensitivity trait and now we will discuss the psychological characteristics of the trait.

**Psychological Characteristics of Sensitivity**

Aron (2016) identifies four main characteristics of high sensitivity: Depth of processing, overstimulation, emotional reactivity, and sensing the subtle. I explain each of these four characteristics. The first characteristic is depth of processing.

**Depth of processing**

Highly sensitive people process more by relating and comparing what they notice to their past experiences (Aron, 2016). MRIs of those with the sensitivity trait show there is more brain activation or effort used when processing perceptual stimuli (Aron, 2016). They continuously relate and compare what they notice in the present to their past experiences and to other things of similarity (Aron, 2016). This extensive processing results in slower decision making in new
situations (Aron, 2016). Once a situation is processed it results in reacting faster to dangers and opportunities in the future because it is processed so deeply the first time around (Aron, 2016). They process outer stimuli deeply and they process inner stimuli deeply as well.

This depth of processing is also about how the inner world is processed as well. The inner world is comprised of thoughts and feelings. Often, those with the trait are very aware of what is occurring in their inner world. They spend much time integrating what is happening in their inner states with those of outer states (Acevedo et al., 2014). Therefore, much reflection time is needed. This intense awareness of the inner world can be a gift if you know how to manipulate those thoughts and emotions. It can be negative if you do not know you can change your thoughts or if you are overstimulated. Now, I discuss the second characteristic of being highly sensitive.

**Overstimulation**

The second characteristic is overstimulation. Dr. Elaine Aron describes overstimulation well by stating:

Stimulation is anything that wakes up the nervous system, gets its attention, makes the nerves fire off another round of the little electrical charges that they carry. We usually think of stimulation as coming from outside, but of course it can come from our body (such as pain, muscle tension, hunger, thirst, or sexual feelings) or as memories, fantasies, thoughts, or plans (Aron, 2016, p. 8).

Stimulation can vary in intensity and in duration. Having many things to remember, loud noise, or an ongoing event may not be overstimulating individually, but the combination or the prolonged existence of different stimuli is what is often the deciding factor when it comes to overstimulation.
Overstimulation is correlated to exhibiting poor coherence manageability, meaningfulness, having lower self-efficiency, and having higher levels of alienation (Evers, Rasche, & Schabracq, 2008), all of which could have detrimental effects on academic, social, or work performances. Yet, when highly sensitive people are not overstimulated, they perform extremely well in these situations. When alone or in a peaceful environment, their efficiency increases as they can take advantage of their sensitivities. Highly sensitive people need to be aware of and manage their overstimulation. Overstimulation is one of the most challenging characteristic of the trait. Often it is affected by a variety of sensory inputs in the subtle environment which I will discuss next.

Awareness of the subtle

The third characteristic of the sensitivity trait is the ability to pick up on the subtleties in one’s environment. Sometimes, this leads to overstimulation; however, if the person has lower stress levels and is in a calm and relaxed environment, attention to subtleties is a gift. When processing new information, sensitive people process deeply, which gives them enough time to notice all of the subtleties of the stimuli (Aron, 2004). It is the ability to process the subtleties that results in many of these individuals being gifted in some way.

Dr. Linda Silverman, an expert on giftedness, states giftedness is a developmental advancement in abstract reasoning, emotional sensitivity, and intensity (Silverman, 1993). She states that there are a wide variety of intelligences that children are gifted in (Silverman, 1993). Gere et al. (2009) studied gifted children and found that they are more sensitive to their environment and react with heightened emotional and behavioural responses compared to children of average intelligence. Aron (2013) stated that there is a correlation between giftedness and the sensitivity trait due to dealing with the depth of processing and the sensitivity to the
subtle in the environment. Those with sensitivity often see, hear, feel, and know subtleties others do not.

A study by Jonsson, Grim, and Kjellgren (2014) illustrated that those with high sensitivity experience more altered states of consciousness (ASC). ASC is consciousness that differs from the waking state. Many people describe ASC when hypnotised, meditating, or praying. During 45 minutes of sensory isolation in a flotation tank, those who are sensitive describe more non-ordinary states than less sensitive persons (Jonsson, Grim, & Kjellgren, 2014). It is the awareness of the subtleties that can cause great experiences as well as lead to states of overstimulation. I will now discuss emotional reactivity as a characteristic of high sensitivity.

**Emotional reactivity**

The fourth characteristic of high sensitivity is emotional reactivity. Many sensitive people assert that at times they feel what others feel. Those who are highly sensitive are aware of the emotional states of others due to increased activation of mirror neurons in the front of the brain (Acevedo et al., 2014). It is these neurons that allow us to adopt another’s point of view (Ramachandran, 2009).

Dr. Elaine Aron (2016) aligns mirror neurons with the capacity of empathy: “the mirror neuron area helps us know others’ intentions and how they feel; hence, they are thought to be partly responsible for the universal human capacity for empathy” (p. xx). The increased activation in the mirror neurons in highly sensitive people results in deeper emotional reactivity to the emotional states of others.

Emotional reactivity can be a challenge at times. When a person is calm they may not react negatively to a situation; yet, if they are overstimulated a highly sensitive person may have
a negative emotional reaction to that same stimuli. For example, if a highly sensitive child watches extensive television (visual and noise stimulus) and then is asked to turn it off and go clean their room, the child may react with anger or even rage. This same child without extensive television stimulation may not react negatively when asked to clean their room. The key is to monitor levels of stimulation.

Negative emotional reactivity can result from inner world ideas as well. For example, if a highly sensitive person holds ideas of disempowerment or victimization, they may think they do not have control of their abilities. If this is the case, the likelihood of them having a negative emotional reaction to outer world situations increases. In my experience, I found that if we can change the beliefs and values that govern our lives, we can change our perception of situations we find ourselves in. If we change our perception of situations, we can change how we react emotionally in those situations.

This section illustrated the details of a highly sensitive person. It covered the biological aspects of the trait, how upbringing affects the sensitivity trait, and the four main psychological characteristics of the sensitivity: depth of processing, overstimulation, sensing the subtle, and emotional reactivity. In the following section I review Western worldview to illustrate how this worldview does not fit with being highly sensitive.

**Western Worldview**

The concept of the Western worldview has not been around for a long time and was created by Caucasian men in power. The worldview emerged from the Judeo-Christian religion whose texts were edited by men in power in 325 AD in the 4th Century (Braeden, 2017). During this time the texts in Christianity were drastically altered and texts written by women were discarded altogether (Braeden, 2017). The Western worldview was shaped by imperialism and
colonialism and was put into action utilizing religion, politics, economics, education, media, and medical systems (Hand Clow & Clow, 2010). Its focus is on having or acquiring rather than experiencing (Foromm, 2016).

This focus on acquiring results in a society that is focused on the outer world and on accumulation. In Western society it is taught that happiness can be acquired through acquisition of things that are outside of oneself. Also, Western society views humans as separate from nature (Foromm, 2016; Holz & Holz, 2013). Therefore, nature too is viewed as something that can be acquired and used by the individual. Acquisition and viewing nature as separate are two of the many values that emerge from a world view of separatism.

Western values emerging from the worldview of separatism include “independence, competition, materialism, ownership and acquisition, aggression, confidence, interference, respect for youthfulness, noise, emphasis on the individual, time based on the clock, emphasis on acquiring, action, and control of nature” (Baskin, 2011, p. 87). When we hold these values at our core, we align with beliefs and thoughts that build off these core values. For example, if we hold a core value of youthfulness, we spend extensive resources and time on looking young. If we hold a core value of emphasis on the individual, we rarely do things for others and we may feel alone.

This list is similar to Dr. Carmen Boulter’s list in the Pyramid Code Series (2009). She discusses the difference between a patriarchal society and a matriarchal society. A patriarchal society is based on history, linear time, dogma, rationality, waking reality, and science (Boulter, 2009). Some of these values can be of value if balanced with values that emerge from a matriarchal society such as wholeness, community, cyclical time, and spirit. Western society holds similar values as a patriarchal society; yet, in this day and age it also employs other values
of extensive noise, aggression, materialism, and control of nature. Western society may be akin to a destructive patriarchal society. There are many values that do not fit well for someone who is highly sensitive.

Here are some examples of why the Western worldview and values does not fit well for highly sensitive people. First, because a highly sensitive person does well in environments with less stimulation, a worldview that promotes noise and exterior materials does not fit because extensive stuff and extensive noise can lead to overstimulation. Second, those with high sensitivity more often turn to a spiritual path which focuses on the spirit just as much if not more than the material world. Therefore, focus on Western values of materialism, ownership, and acquisition decreases in importance. Third, because there is an increase in mirror neurons in highly sensitive people, those who are very sensitive often feel the way other’s feel, so they do not want to hurt others. Therefore, Western values of aggression, competition, and interference do not fit well for those who are sensitive. Fourth, because highly sensitive people need reflection time a Western value of being in action does not fit well and can also lead to overstimulation. It is not that these values are not valuable, it is just that there are other guiding values that fit much better for those who are highly sensitive. In my experience, the values that fit much better emerge from an Indigenous worldview.

**Indigenous Worldview**

Indigenous people view the world as all things being connected to one another. Indigenous worldview has existed for thousands of years and is found among Indigenous people on this continent as well as Hawaii, Australia, Japan, and Europe. During the research practicum I learned from those who are Indigenous to this land and I am someone who journeys back to this worldview. During my journey I learned that I am from the Slavic people, which many
Europeans originate from. Much like First Nation culture, early Slavic people worshipped mother earth, and had social organization based on co-operation, family, and equality (Borzyskowski, 2018). However, much of this knowledge was lost due to the persecution of Slavic people by Hitler and the penetration of patriarchal society movements.

First Nations Peoples here on this land are subjected to colonialism. The Indigenous worldview does not fit with the Western worldview; therefore, there are attempts to demoralize, destroy, and then assimilate First Nations Peoples (Absolon, 2010). Our past illustrates years and years of European individuals and society inflicting disease, taking lands, segregation, removal of children from parents and communities, and attempts at assimilation of First Nations Peoples. However, emerging through this destruction are First Nation People standing strong and maintaining and teaching their worldview, values, and cultural teachings.

Indigenous worldviews believe all things as connected and therefore we are in a relationship with all things (Absolon, 2010; Hodge & Limb, 2010; Virtue, 2001). If we are in relationship to all things, this means we are accountable to all things. This accountability is found in many cultures, societies, and teachings around the world. The accountability permeates relationships between all people, animals, winged creatures, insects, all aspects of the earth, the sky, the cosmos, everything. We are connected to all things outside of us, and all things inside of us are connected.

“We are connected not just to each other and to the world that we live in, but our body, mind, and soul are connected, inseparable” (Holz & Holz, 2013, p. 28). There are many Indigenous words that convey this idea; they translate into English as the “environment,” but unlike the Western definition of the environment, it is not something outside of you; you and your environment are one and the same (Holz & Holz, 2013). It is this ancient idea of
connectedness that Indigenous knowledge has maintained for over 50,000 years (Boulter, 2009; Holz & Holz, 2013). First Nation Peoples on this land have maintained a vast amount of the cultural knowledge that emerges from this worldview. This cultural knowledge teaches how to live a life of accountability; a good life. In cultural teachings, there is much emphasis on the spiritual aspects of all things.

Emphasis on spirituality is present in every aspect of cultural living in Indigenous communities (Bennett, 2014; Baskin, 2011; Hand Clow & Clow, 2010; Duran, 2000, 2006; Holz & Holz, 2013; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Daily life and spirituality are inseparable (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The way in which Indigenous Peoples access the spirit realm is through daily rituals and ceremony; which is unique to each individual culture. Once this realm of oneness is experienced through ceremony, it is difficult to assert you are not connected to something greater on a spiritual level. The value of a belief that everything is spiritual and has a spirit is evident in Indigenous culture. This worldview gives rise to specific Indigenous values.

Indigenous values date back thousands of years and are found in every part of the world, which illustrates that this is something deep, long lasting, and non-local. These values are detailed by Baskin (2011) as “interdependence, co-operation, non-materialistic, non-aggressive, humility, silence, time based on nature, patience, and harmony with nature” (p. 87). According to Boulter (2009) these values are similar to the values held in matriarchal societies.

Both matriarchal and Indigenous worldviews have been around for thousands of years and the Western worldview has been around for hundreds of years. The Indigenous worldview is also aligned with the word “authentic” by Manulani Aluli-Meyer (2008). Authentic means “not false or copied; genuine; real” (Dictionary.com, 2018, def 1). My spiritual journey towards my
true authentic self as spirit brought me to Indigenous worldview and values. This worldview and values fits much better for me than the Western worldview and values. I still value some patriarchal societal values of science, rationality, and waking reality; but for me, it makes sense to have a divine balance between the two. Through this process I have found that leading with Indigenous values fits best for me.

Here are some examples of the reasons Indigenous worldviews and values fits best for me as someone who is highly sensitive. First, those who are sensitive are very empathetic and have mirror neurons that are more active allowing us to feel how another feels (Aron, 2016). We feel very connected to others. Therefore, Indigenous values of non-aggression and cooperation matches well because when we are working together, we feel good because others feel good as well. Second, those who are sensitive find themselves “interested in spiritual paths” (Aron, 2016, p. 9). Indigenous worldview and values of spirituality, non-materialism and humility suits someone who is highly sensitive and on a spiritual path. Third, Indigenous worldviews value time based on nature and moments in reflection and silence are less stimulating for a someone who is highly sensitive allowing them to be more purposeful and successful in life (Aron, 2016). Fourth, the Indigenous values of harmony with nature supports sensitive people well because there is a correlation between sensitivity and a connection to and caring for the earth (Aron, 2013). Fifth, people who are sensitive experience more altered states of consciousness (Jonsson, Grim, and Kjellgren, 2014). These states of consciousness are promoted and sought out through Indigenous culture through ceremonies such as sweats, fasting, shaking tent, and more. These are several examples of the match between Indigenous values and high sensitivity.

In this section, I reviewed the literature on being highly sensitive. I looked at the biological aspects of this trait, how childhood upbringing affects highly sensitive people, and the
four psychological aspects of being sensitive. Because my spiritual journey encompassed journeying from the Western worldview and values toward Indigenous worldview and values, I reviewed the Western and Indigenous worldview and values in this section. I gave examples of Western values that do not fit as well for those who are sensitive and examples of Indigenous values that fit well for those who are sensitive. To explain my spiritual journey of “value walking” I wanted to find a methodology that matched well with both Indigenous values and being a sensitive person. What I aligned with is the methodology of autoethnography.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this report is to tell the story about my journey of “value walking” from a Western worldview and values to an Indigenous worldview and values and how I reconciled the physical and non-physical aspects of me. To tell this story I use the methodology of autoethnography. I chose autoethnography because I felt it fits well with Indigenous values and ways of knowing because autoethnography focuses on storytelling which is the medium used in the transfer of Indigenous knowledge (Duran, 2000). Also, I chose this method because I felt it fit well for me as a highly sensitive person and because autoethnography focuses on the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the researcher. I reflected deeply on my experience through this practicum and I wanted to capture that experience in the hopes that it may help another who is highly sensitive.

This section reviews the history of autoethnography, the core principles, the methods, and the ethical considerations. Autoethnography is a way of being (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2014). When we are researching we are holding ourselves accountable to the relationship to all things. When we hold ourselves accountable, our research has affects that reverberate into all relations or the whole of creation.

A pillar of autoethnography is research being accountable to the betterment of the world. Autoethnographers are storytellers who merge storytelling and academia to improve the lives of others. Autoethnography offers a balance between analytical and artistic manifestations of interpreting lived experiences (Adams et al., 2014). The practice of storytelling is an ancient way of transferring knowledge. Storytelling has been used in Indigenous cultures before the written word existed and before time was measured in hours, minutes, and seconds. In my experience,
being autoethnographic allows me to organize and illustrate my spiritual journey of reconciling Aboriginal worldviews with myself. First, I will review the history of autoethnography.

**History of Autoethnography**

Storytelling extends back into the ages, yet the history of autoethnography is relatively short. In the 1970s and 1980s, the ideals in the social sciences were shifting due to the postmodern era. Many new ideas were emerging, one of which was the inability of the researcher to separate his or her self from the research experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography methodology asserts that it is desirable to recognize the part that researchers play in their research and it is important to explain how they are affected emotionally by research experiences (Adams et al., 2014). Therefore, researchers using this methodology recognize the interplay between physical realities and emotions (Bochner, 2016). Both the objective and subjective is valued.

Autoethnography as a methodology is about accountability to the individuals and communities it studies. Historically, the representation of the “exotic other” was not shared with research participants and participants were represented as the researcher saw fit (Adams et al., 2014). “Researchers have committed terrible acts against participants in the name of science and the progress of knowledge” (Adams et al., Chapter 1, Section 3, Para. 337). Researchers did not embody the realization of accountability — there was no accountability to peoples, their ancestors, communities, their ways of life, and the lands. Autoethnography is based on a more accountable and holistic way of conducting research. In the next section, I discuss the core ideals of autoethnography.
Core Principles

The core principles held by autoethnographers include: acknowledging the limits of scientific knowledge, connecting personal experience to larger contexts, balancing intellect and art, and being aware of ethical implications. “Autoethnography recognizes the limits of scientific knowledge (particularly what can be known or explained), particularly regarding identities, lives, and relationships, and creating nuanced, complex, and specific accounts of personal/cultural experiences” (Adams et al., Chapter 2, Section 1, para. 599).

Autoethnographers choose to ground research in personal experience. Therefore, their proximity to a situation or experience is not only close, it is located directly in the thick of an experience. The reflecting and writing results in empirical knowledge that adds to general discussions of identity, culture, and phenomenon. This results in audiences hearing stories right from the individual or the source of an experience.

Autoethnography answers “…the call to narrative and storytelling and plac[es] equal importance on intellect/knowledge and aesthetics/ artistic craft” (Adams et al., 2014, p. 25). The researcher uses methods of inquiry as well as providing enjoyable artistic stories to align with the reader. Because research is often written in an academic language, it does not engage the general population (Ellis & Bochner, 2014). This is a barrier to improving the lives of others. Autoethnographers engage in the art of storytelling to remove this barrier. Autoethnography uses storytelling to deliver much needed information to broader audiences.

This section examined the history and core ideals of autoethnography. By using academic methods and artful stories, autoethnographers can focus on creating pieces that are accountable and connected to all things. The following section reviews these research methods.
Methods

The core ideals of autoethnography shape the methods. This is similar to how an individual’s values shape their decisions and actions in life. Core ideals of autoethnography are akin to values, and methods are akin to a person’s actions. Here, I reviewed the methods used by autoethnographers as well as provided examples of how I employed this method on my journey.

As a method, autoethnographers focus on their personal experience in research (Adams et al., 2014). Personal experience and subjectivity are used in designing research (Ellis et al., 2011). This research project is guided by the ideas, feelings, experiences, and questions I am grappling with. Like all autoethnographers, I do not hide my reasons for doing the research; rather, I share them with the reader and explain how my ideas, feelings, experiences, and questions shape this research and lead me to the moments presented in this text. At the time of formulating my proposal for research, I was deepening my learning of spirituality and I felt as if I hit a road block. I didn’t want my spirituality to be separate from my everyday life, but I did not know how to incorporate the two. I came across Indigenous worldview and it felt right for me, so my primary purpose for doing this research was to learn a worldview and values that fit better for me than Western worldview and values.

Some autoethnographers share their experience about their field work, others discuss feelings and beliefs about phenomena, another may present experiences with identity, and some write about ah-ha moments (Adams et al., 2014). In this report, I discuss the ah-ha moments I experienced along my journey towards reconciling aspects of me. I share how shifting to Indigenous worldview and values gifted me with a new lens that assisted me to understand the deeper realities of who I am.
Autoethnographers demonstrate sense-making processes (Adams et al., 2014). They offer complex, insider journeys towards making sense of something and explain how that experience is challenging and transformative (Adams et al., 2014). Here, I seek to illustrate my experience of reconciling the physical and non-physical aspects of the self. I illustrate how I emerged through the struggle of shifting from Western worldview and values towards an Indigenous worldview and values. Autoethnographers understand no two experiences are the same; yet, their stories offer readers another’s experience of how that writer made sense of a situation. These stories offer companionship and hope.

Another method represented in autoethnography is to use and show reflexivity (Ellis et al., 2011). “Reflexivity asks us to explicitly acknowledge our research in relation to power” (Adams et al., 2014, p. 29). For example, as a white, able-bodied woman with a family, in my early 30s, who lives in Canada, I have certain privileges which were discussed in the introduction of this report.

Autoethnographers use their personal experiences to understand and often critique cultural life (Adams et al., 2014). In this report I seek to shine a light on a worldview that is destructive and a worldview that is based on creation and wholeness. It is my hope that my stories assist others in questioning their worldviews and the values that are guiding them.

By engaging others in the thought process of how these values affect them and others, I seek to create a response in the reader (Adams et al., 2014). I am asking the readers to connect with the stories I share. Everyone will vary in their method of engagement. Some may dive in and drink up the knowledge because it resonates with them, others may mentally toss the ideas around, and still others may push them away with force and leave them for a later experience. Some may cry, laugh, or be angered. No method or resulting emotion is correct or incorrect for
that matter; they are all just reactions that push us deeper into examination and exploration of self, of personal values, of others—of everything.

**Ethical Considerations**

Autoethnographers focus on and attend to all the ethical implications of their work for themselves, their participants, and their readers/audiences (Adams et al., 2014; Ellis et al., 2011). The work of intellect and art must improve the lives of all participants involved. There are many dimensions to think about when writing about how personal experiences are connected to greater contexts. Many aspects need to be reflected upon such as: epistemological issues (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008); proper representation of self and others (Adams et al., 2014); ethical consideration of the larger communities that the self and others come from; ethical consideration of readers; and aesthetic considerations or proper representation of the art of storytelling (Adams et al., 2014). An autoethnographer needs to follow methods, ensure their writing is ethical, makes the world a better place for all, and balances everything in the art of good storytelling.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data of personal stories were constructed through interactions with others and my reflections, thoughts, feelings, and dreams were recorded in notebook journals from September, 2017 up to current date. From the data of the reflexive journals, I began to sift through the data many times over. I highlighted and underlined many statements in the journals. I kept a new notebook beside me where I wrote out many ideas and themes. I moved through a process of reviewing the data, putting the data away for a period, reflecting upon it, and revisiting it. I looked for relationships between the themes and narrowed the number of them. A larger theme of this being a personal spiritual journey started to emerge. From here, I found I journeyed from Western values towards Indigenous values. I identified three major values that were shifting.
Namely, competitiveness to cooperation; time based on the clock to time based on nature; and the individual to the collective. Through analysis and reflection, I was able to find the *ah-ha* moments that emerged while walking from Western values to Indigenous values. These ideas emerged through right-brained meditation, reflection, and intuition and through left-brained logical data theme analysis.

Questions of dependability and transferability arose during this process. Dependability, or whether findings are consistent and repeatable, may be questioned because at times I used the capability of intuition and followed with methods of logic. I value both intuition and logic equally and see both as valid. The transferability of my findings to a larger audience may be a factor. I do not know if others will benefit from the findings because there is little written on a spiritual journey of moving from Western values to Indigenous values. Societal trends towards new age spirituality and Buddhist practices such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness, and the proving of connectivity of all things through quantum physics; illustrates to me there are many people walking from values of separatism to values of holism. I feel these spiritual journeys are like the spiritual journey I am walking. In the findings section of this document I review the stories of three other individuals who have similar spiritual experiences. With that said, this is but one story. If even one person gets something from this story, then I have succeeded through the eyes of autoethnography.

The method of exploration I have chosen to engage with is autoethnography. Autoethnography explores cultural phenomenon through personal experiences in research. I chose to write about particular *ah-ha* moments as I worked through the process of making sense of the process of shifting values from Western to Indigenous. Through the process of sharing my
experience I seek to engage with the audience. Now I will move on to tell the stories that will elicit a response in you, the reader.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Value Walking

My experience of walking from Western values and worldview to an Indigenous worldview and values is positive and healing. This process is my spiritual healing journey; or a reconciliation between my physical and my spiritual selves. The material world aligns with Western values and the emphasis on spirit aligns with Indigenous values (Baskin, 2011). As a highly sensitive person who is very aware of my thoughts and feelings, it is clear to me that I feel greater well-being after walking towards, and experiencing Indigenous values. This allows me to be more balanced between my physical being and my non-physical or spiritual being. Learning Indigenous values and worldview resulted in a decrease of anxious thoughts, a decrease in feelings of being alone, an increase in self-esteem or self-love, and an increase in feelings of being connected.

Masculine or patriarchal societies can be associated with the left side of the brain. Dr. A.C. Ross who is Dakota-Lakota and a professor at the University of Colorado states: “The left side of the brain controls logic, linearity, reading, and writing, time orientation, and masculine expression. The right side of the brain is dominant in instinct, holism, dance, art, spatiality and feminine expression” (1989, p. 14). Those who are highly sensitive are often right-brained dominant, see connections between things, are highly intuitive, and empathetic (Aron, 2016). If highly sensitive people are more collective thinkers, right-brained dominant, intuitive, and empathetic as the research suggested, then sensitive people would be more aligned with Indigenous worldviews and values. I do not assert that we throw out patriarchal values, but a balance between the feminine and masculine makes sense for me.
Now, I explain the significance of value walking based on someone who is highly sensitive. I call it value walking because it feels like I move from one place to another. It is a journey that I am still travelling. Here, I display three values I walked between. I traveled from Western values of the individual, time based on clock, and competition, to Indigenous values of the collective, time based on nature, and collaboration.

Aluli-Meyer (2010) discusses the process of knowledge becoming knowing. She states that knowledge is ideas that float around us, and these ideas turn into knowing when we experience them (Aluli-Meyer, 2010). The process I followed on the journey was knowledge turning into knowing. Knowledge is the information I gather from reading, watching, and speaking with others. Knowing is the experiences I align with which allowed me to put the knowledge into practice.

In the first part of my practicum I gathered knowledge about Indigenous worldviews and values that align with Indigenous worldview. As my ideas started to take shape on the mental level, I began to speak about them, write about them, and post them on the wall for myself and my family to see. Then, I began to practice them mentally through the process of repetition. I read these values daily, both morning and night, to create mental habits. Once these mental habits became more programmed, experiences started occurring in various situations and in my relationships. For example, I found myself thinking about collaborating more with others, which led to an invitation to work with another company in a collaborative way. These experiences allowed me to practice Indigenous values in an experiential way.

What I found is there are precise moments when knowledge becomes knowing. I believe these moments are what autoethnography methodology calls the *a-ha* moment. To explain these *a-ha* moments, or moments when knowledge becomes knowing, I will discuss the process of the
experience of walking from three Western values (the individual, time based on clock, and competition) to three Indigenous values (the collective, time based on nature, and collaboration). I do this in a fairy tale story-like manner, so you may want to take off your academic hat and replace it with a favorite dress-up hat.

The Values

The first value walk is time, from time based on the clock to time based on nature or natural flow. Before I began walking this value I was very concerned about time and felt like I was always rushing myself, others, and life forward. Organizing my life based on the clock is a learned behaviour from childhood and was implemented in many aspects of my daily life. After learning more about the natural flow of life I began to relax. The a-ha moment came through an elder from Sturgeon Lake First Nation who taught me about proper protocol and how that relates to time. Since making this shift I am less concerned about clock time and things seem to work out well resulting in me being more supported by the clock rather than being a slave to it.

The second value walk is from competition to cooperation. Before I started walking towards cooperation, I was unaware that I am a competitive person. It was not until I started stripping away old programming and reviewing my thoughts that I began to see I am quietly competitive. The a-ha moment was that I realized that I am competitive and then I committed myself to changing to win-win situations that are good for the collective of all life. If I grew up in a Western society built on ideas of survival of the fittest and competition, then I am programmed through media, education, and politics to be competitive.

The third value walk I took is from the individual to the collective. Before this journey, I liked to think that I was focused on the collective, but what I found was that when I give to others, sometimes I feel like a victim. The a-ha moment occurred when I realized that I am part
of the collective too. There is no need for thoughts of victimization because I am an unlimited fountain of giving and all that I give comes back to me as well because I too am part of the collective or whole.

Here’s a story about a healing journey of a highly sensitive Caucasian westernized mother who is seeking holistic values. Instinctively or intuitively, she feels that some values that have been taught to her thus far are not supportive and are damaging to her and to others. So, she sets out on a journey of knowledge and knowing with the hopes of reaching deep understanding of holistic values.

This story is based on three different scenarios along the healing journey that reflect real life situations. The scenarios are morphed and told in a fairy tale fashion. Telling a fairy tale is “about discovering the richness, subtlety, and astonishing wisdoms of your inner life” (Kushner, 2017, para. 8). A famous writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, said that a good writer “seems to be writing about himself, but has his eye always on that thread of the universe which runs through himself and all things” (Kushner, 2017, para. 8). This fairy tale is about me, but there are many trends throughout the western world that illustrate a trend of moving towards holistic worldview (Bennet, 2014). On that note, let’s ease into the intersection of creativity, healing, and storytelling to view a healing journey.

The Fairy Tale Story

First, I prepare for this journey. I pull out a knapsack from the back of my closet and I blow off the dust. I unzip it and find useless and sharp items. These items make good kindling; So my family and I start a fire and we have a wiener roast.
Second, I watch, read, listen, and ask questions about Indigenous worldview and values. Teachers tell me that on this first journey I come across three bridges. The key to getting across these bridges are the *a-ha* moments, that is, when knowledge becomes knowing.

Third, I lay tobacco on the earth and pray for guidance and strength on this journey. Then, I gather branches from four different types of trees. Each branch represents each piece of knowledge gifted to me.

Fourth, I gently place all of the items including the bundle of knowledge into the knapsack.

I begin to journey down a winding path and meet a clock with arms and legs. He introduces himself as Time. Time looks at his clock and says that I’m going to be late and that I better hurry. I slip on my running shoes and begin to run down the winding path. I come to the first bridge.

At this bridge sits an elderly man with a ball cap. He is laughing. He looks at the trees behind me and asks me, “Who’s time are you on?”

I know his words are knowledge, but I do not feel the knowing yet.

I begin walking across the bridge. Suddenly, from the bottom of the bridge crawls many scary sticky and black numbers. They are growling and sneering. I feel anxiousness crawling up into me and I turn around to start to head back to the other side when the *a-ha* moment hits me. My journey has no timeline and I need not be in a rush. Like nature, my journey unfolds based on a natural unfolding and is not manipulated by time. I see the man, he smiles and nods at me.

I turn around and walk towards the sneering numbers. They feel my seriousness and they quiet themselves and crawl back to where they emerged.
I make it to the other side. The knowledge of time based on nature is now knowing. There is much work to do on this value, but when you do it once, you can do it again and again in different situations and circumstances.

I feel lighter as I skip along the winding path.

Soon, I come to an opening on the path. The next bridge must be here. Yet, what I see is a group of people that look sad. I ask a young boy what is wrong and he says that there is no bridge. I ask where it is, and he proceeds to tell me that the bridge appears when the most beautiful song is played. I exclaim that a competition must be held to see who can make the bridge appear. Everyone agrees.

So, one by one people take turns singing, playing instruments, dancing, and telling stories. None of this prevails and no bridge reveals itself. It is my turn, I perform my best and again no bridge appears. A tall lady turns to me in anger and yells, “You did not do it!” and then begins to cry. I become defensive. In the midst of this defensiveness and sadness growing in me, I experience the a-ha moment. We must work together as a collective.

“Let’s all play together!” I exclaim. It is worth a try. We all begin singing, playing, and dancing a beautiful song together and we get lost in the beautiful song. We are so lost in our connection through song, we do not even realize that the bridge has emerged.

Then, a young boy shouts that the bridge is here! We all cheer and make it to the other side of the bridge. We offer thanks and hugs and I bid them farewell. Often when we compete we do not realize that we are also hurting ourselves. When we cooperate, we create something new together that is good for everyone. The knowledge of cooperation is now knowing. I know there is still much practice needed, but if you can do it once, you can do it again and again in different situations and circumstances.
I feel lighter as I skip along the winding path.

Finally, I come across the third bridge. I continue to proceed across the bridge until I come to a small hole in the middle of the bridge. I’m about to step over it when I hear a small voice say, “Excuse me.” I look down and there is a smiling fairy. She proceeds to tell me that they need help repairing this little hole because their village below is not protected from the rain. It does not seem like a big hole. I look at the little pebbles that are used to fix this hole. I know that it is going to take me half a day if I help them. I remember the first lesson about time and the second lesson about cooperation and I realize this is an opportunity for me to practice. I say yes, and we begin the work. We laugh and tell stories. Little by little we fill in the hole and there is one last rock to put in place. I look up from the bridge and the rest of the bridge is gone! I ask the fairy where the rest of the bridge is and she explains it is an illusion and that the bridge was never there. She states this last rock is the key to creating the rest of the bridge.

I am shocked. If I had stepped over the hole I would have plummeted to the ground. I am happy that I am helping them, but I did not realize that they are helping me as well.

In that moment I experience the a-ha moment. Valuing the collective is vital for all, including the individual.

I give thanks to my new friends and they thank me. I make it to the other side of the bridge and bid them farewell.

Often when we focus on doing what is good for the collective we create rather than destroy. We also get what we need because we too are part of the whole. The knowledge of the collective is now knowing. There is still much practice needed, but if you can do it once, you can do it again and again in different situations and circumstances.

I feel lighter as I skip along the winding path.
When I arrive home I open up my knapsack and to my surprise I see that my bundles of knowledge have turned into lessons of knowing. I take them out and gently place them inside my mind and my heart. I take a deep breath and I know I am the same, but different. I am closer to my authentic self. I feel balance and collaboration between all aspects of me and I feel good. I feel full of life. I am more aware of my authentic self and my value in the connection of all things.

**The Healing of Fairy Tale Writing**

By reviewing my reflexive journals and situating the information in an autoethnographic framework based on a holistic or Indigenous worldview, it made sense to tell a story. It is challenging, but also very enjoyable and healing. A common thread in research done by biologists, anthropologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, and researchers in semiotics and linguistics is that stories help us make sense of our lives (Kushner, 2017). This is reiterated by Carl Jung who endured his own process of fairy tale writing. This process made way for his theory of active imagination and archetypes (Kushner, 2017).

Like Jung and many other storytellers, I used the fairy tale as a way of processing my healing journey. The process of learning and then walking through experiences and coming to *aha* moments changed my life. As a highly sensitive person processing these experiences deeply, it is now clear to me that this process increased my feelings of being connected to the whole or collective and it increased how I view my value in the whole of which I am a part.

In the previous section, I reviewed the findings of my healing journey of walking from three Western values to three Indigenous values. I told this story in a fairy tale manner to allow the reader to stand at the intersection of creativity, healing, and imagination. Next, I compare
these findings to the findings of three others who walked a similar journey. I will end this section by a discussion on the implications to social work.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The spiritual journey looks different for everyone; yet, there seems to be common threads between them. In this section I will discuss three different stories which are elaborated upon in three different books. These writers gained knowledge, turned that knowledge into knowing, and then took it a step further and shared those experiences with the world by telling their stories. Also, I discuss how these findings impact social work.

Similarities Between Spiritual Journeys

First is the beautiful healing journey experienced and written by a psychologist, Dr. Eduardo Duran, who is of mixed ancestry. His story is set in New Mexico and he has Indigenous roots to the Navajo people. He explains his spiritual journey of learning outside of his Westernized psychology training. It is a personal journey to awareness of the intersecting of physical reality and spiritual practices and process (Duran, 2000).

Second, is the journey written by Robbie Holz, a scientist from the United States of America who has many failed relationships and a terminal illness. Spirit guides him to the Australian outback and to an Indigenous tribe where he releases his old westernized programming and begins to heal from his illness. He comes back knowing he is connected to something much greater than himself (Holz & Holz, 2013).

Third is the journey of Dr. A.C. Ross, an Indigenous professor teacher at the University of Colorado who had extensive knowledge about Indigenous Peoples but did not have the knowing. His story is about his journey to the deeper experiences of the culture he comes from as well as the deeper wisdom that Indigenous knowledge is everywhere on this earth (Ross, 1989). In his book he elaborates on all the strings between cultures and practices that tie us together.
These three books illustrated spiritual journeys from three very different individuals. These stories are similar to mine in the sense that they journey from a Western way of being to enduring spiritual experiences that teach them the value of their spiritual self. There are many more stories, but I chose these three because they all are nestled in the learning of Indigenous knowledge through experiential learning. Unlike me, they are all male and I do not know if they are highly sensitive or not.

In all stories that I read and hear about from others, there are common threads that all the writers experienced. There is an aspect of feeling like you are breaking down something that no longer serves you (Duran, 2000; Holz & Holz, 2013; Kushner, 2017; Ross, 2011). Duran (2000) states that he struggles and he keeps trying to find a psychological technique or method or theory to solve this problem to no avail; finally, he gives up and follows the experience. There is nothing wrong with a breakdown when you break down the old and replace it with something new that better fits with your authentic self. This is reiterated in the literature by Dr. Carl Jung who also used stories to heal or reconcile himself after his break with Freud (Kushner, 2017). I came to many points where chaos filled my mind and my life as I shifted and changed. In these ah-ha moments, something died in me and something else was born in its place.

Another common thread that many stories shared was becoming aware that you are connected to something that is greater than yourself and from this experience they saw all these amazing connections (Duran, 2000; Holz & Holz, 2013; Ross, 2011). Both Ross (2011) and Holz (2013) discuss connecting to a collective to gain knowledge that was previously unknown to these individuals. Ross (2011) also looked at a huge number of similarities between different cultures and disciplines that emerge from opposite hemispheres of the earth. He states, “The entire experience, for me, was a graphic illustration that we are, indeed, all related!” (Ross, 2011,
p. 209). Many on this journey account for uncanny events of things lining up perfectly as if it
could not have been planned better, or accessing information beyond what they could know.
Once you experience these moments, you gain a deeper knowing that these connections exist and
all beings are part of it.

Another common thread that many share is feeling better about themselves and about life.
I have yet to hear of a person who comes to the place of knowing after being on a spiritual
journey and decides to go back to where they came from. Duran (2000) states:

I know that I have been part of something extraordinary. I had been allowed to witness
some timeless mysteries that at times threatened what I knew as sanity. I have been
privileged to have had a great, and until now, unknown teacher. All of these memories
will forever be imprinted in my heart… (p. 5)

Duran and many others feel very blessed and humbled to be part of extraordinary
experiences along a spiritual journey. The healing, the awareness, the peace, and the freedom I
have gained along my journey is more precious to me than any material item. The extraordinary
experience has made me better than I was before. Bennett (2014), in her guidebook to conscious
living, states it beautifully by saying:

[In a S]piritual [worldview] or an indigenous worldview, you feel for yourself—and thus
know experientially—that everything is inextricably interrelated and interdependent. You
begin to heal your own life, and will experience far more joy and pleasure in your daily
life than before. This energizes you and your relationships with others, and helps you to
focus your passion in creative service to what you love. This loving service overflows
into the larger world, and it is what will help us all bring healing magic to the world
together. (p. xxiii)
In this section I compared my healing spiritual journey with three others in which I illustrated three similar aspects between my experience and the experience of them. These aspects included: breaking down the old way of being, the realization that there is a connection to something greater than your individuality, and an awareness that the spiritual journey is positive, in that it leaves you feeling better about yourself and about life. Now, I will look at how these findings impact social work.

**The Impact on Social Work**

I discuss implications of these findings in social work as they relate to competency. Through sharing my experience, I am contributing to the ongoing development of the profession and its ability to serve humanity (CASW, 2005). First, I explore how competency relates to understanding more about highly sensitive people. Second, I discuss competency with clients from sensitive cultures. Third, I focus on the correlation between competency and a healthy helping professional.

**Competency When Working with Highly Sensitive Clients**

“Social workers uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality service possible” (CASW, 2005, p. 8). Many counselling positions are held by social workers and research illustrates that most clients who come for counselling are highly sensitive people (Aron, 2016, 2010).

Most of counselling clients are highly sensitive because those are the people who tend to be more deeply affected by their childhood environment (Aron, 2005). Because highly sensitive people process things on a deeper physical and mental level, they process these situations and the pain more deeply (Aron, 2016). Often, they have an inability to push away or hide pain because they react so strongly to it and they are so aware of their thoughts and feelings. Aron (2010) has
provided a valuable resource for professionals working with highly sensitive clients. This may be a valuable resource for any social worker working with a highly sensitive client.

Learning more about high sensitivity in people allows social workers to learn more about the majority of their clients. Therefore, it allows them to better serve their clients and offer the highest quality service possible. Next, I will look at competency as it relates to working with clients from cultures that promote sensitivity.

**Competency with Cultures that Promote Sensitivity**

In the profession of social work, we offer the most quality services to clients (CASW, 2005). The process of reflecting on values that a professional operates from increases their competency.

Aron (2016) lists an array of cultures that promote sensitivity, including the Japanese and Chinese. In these cultures, spiritual practices, silence, being slow, and being meditative are promoted, respected, and even taught (Aron, 2016). Indigenous values and ways of being are similar, in that Indigenous cultures value spiritual practices, silence, being non-aggressive, and time that is based on nature (Baskin, 2011). These values are unlike Western values that promote aggression, noise, action, and time that is based on the clock (Baskin, 2011). If social workers grow up in a Western society, they are going to be affected by some if not all Western values (Hand Clow & Clow, 2010). If social workers remain unaware of the values that govern them, they risk projecting these values and the biases that accompany these values onto their clients. I realized I had much to learn about history, Indigenous ways of being, the community, and more before supporting the community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation in a positive way.

Once Westernized social workers become aware of their worldview and values which is based on separatism, they may wish to change them to something that is holistic and
collaborative. Regardless of whether they change or not, social workers must leave behind their positions and symbols of power and enter what Willie Ermine calls the ethical space (Ermine, 2000, 2007). This is vital when working across cultures and with different types of people if we seek to do more good than harm. The word ethical or ethics is defined here is “the capacity to know what harms or enhances the well-being of sentient creatures…Additionally, ethics entertains our personal capacity and our integrity to stand up for our cherished notions of good, responsibility, duty, obligations, etc.” (Ermine, 2007, p. 195). Ermine et al. (2005) state that we must enter conversations as equals. When we enter the ethical space as equals, we respect that there are multiverses and multi-realities and no two nations, two cultures, or two people experience things in the same way.

Self-reflection and self-awareness about our values and worldview allows us the ability to get closer to being in an ethical space. It allows us to say, ‘I see the world like this, but I want to hear how you see the world too.’ When we have good communication, we open ourselves to the experience of learning different ways of knowing and working towards an ethical vision. By holding an ethical vision when working with people from different cultures than our own, this supports sensitivity and upholds our ability to provide the highest quality service possible to clients (CASW, 2005). Next, I will explore how competency relates to being healthy as a service provider.

**Competency as a Helper**

We offer clients the best service by being healthy professionals. As counsellors working with individuals, families, groups, and people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, we want to ensure we are the healthiest we can be. By being the healthiest version of ourselves, we can
improve the lives of clients simply through our interaction alone, regardless of what method or technique we use.

It is no secret that mental health professionals have high levels of burnout. Burnout encompasses three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Morse, Salyers, Rollins, Monroe-DeVita, & Pfahler, 2012). Morse, Salyers, Rollins, Monroe-DeVita, and Pfahler (2012) reviewed research and found little that pertains specifically to community health settings. Eight studies on interventions were reviewed and all interventions resulted in increased training for professionals (Morse et al., 2012). Yet, maybe more is needed than increased training. Maybe more prevention is needed.

My question is: are the mental health professionals the healthiest they can be before they enter the field? What prompts this question is a memory from my social work undergraduate program. I received a lot of training on healing interventions, techniques, and theories; yet, I only had one class that provided an experience of healing.

I was in my first year of social work and I registered for a class on spirituality and social work. After rapport and a safe space were established, the professor asked how many of us had been abused in some way, shape, or form. Out of a class of approximately 30 people, all but two people put up their hand. Now, if those people do not do their healing work on their own, there are 28 professionals out in the field that have learned how to help clients but may not have the experiential knowledge of healing. Perhaps what is missing is that many helping professionals enter the profession but need to learn how to heal themselves as well.

In my experience, I felt lucky that I had what I consider to be a good childhood. However, there were some negative experiences in my life that I did not have the skills to fully process, and I was unaware of this fact prior to my practicum. I spent six years developing
myself physically, mentally, and spiritually and I thought I was doing quite well in the areas of well-being, but I had much more learning to do. The cultural tools and healing methods of the Sturgeon Lake First Nation community helped me do much healing myself.

In my experience, value walking away from Western worldview and values to a holistic Indigenous worldview and values helped me reconcile my physical self with my spirit. This experience brought me to an entirely different dimension of well-being. This level of well-being allows me to be more authentic, more compassionate, and more connected to a broader vision of well-being which has reduced burn-out and increased my resilience.

This experience allowed me to be a better social worker and a better sentient being in connection to all things. And that is a story worth sharing. My story is mirrored by the stories of many others. If we have healthy social workers that are taught to heal from the inside, our ability as a profession to uphold value six of Competence in Professional Practice increases greatly. If we are healthy, we do an even better job of offering the highest quality service possible to our clients (CASW, 2005).

In this section, I looked at common threads between the spiritual journey that I went through and the journeys of three others. Also, I reviewed the impact on social work regarding competency when working with highly sensitive clients, competency when working with cultures that promote sensitivity, and competency as a healthy helper.

In Chapter Six I will discuss recommendations emerging from this research practicum experience. Since this report presented more questions than answers for me, the recommendations are for continued research.
CHAPTER SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Recommendations

In this section I look at three recommendations. First, my recommendation is to do more research into the hypothesis of whether experiential knowledge of Indigenous worldview and values would be beneficial to other highly sensitive people and/or to others who are not highly sensitive. The programming with highly sensitive First Nation youth through the Kwayaski Pimâtisiwin program at Sturgeon Lake First Nation will begin to explore this hypothesis.

Second, my recommendation is to do more research into the general level of well-being of students in social work. If results show there is a need to help healers to heal, then maybe this can be addressed at the university level. By holding space for more experiential knowledge in education, we can allow for this healing before people graduate from social work.

Third, my recommendation is personal. My recommendation for myself is to continue to explore value walking with other values and continue to move closer to my true, authentic self, which in turn will help me to reconcile my physical and my spiritual self. If this continues to prove to be valuable, by decreasing my anxiousness and increasing my personal connection, I want to share this experience with more people.

In this section I summarized three recommendations emerging from this research practicum experience with Sturgeon Lake First Nation. Recommendations include continuing research into experiential knowledge of Indigenous worldview and values for highly sensitive people; continuing research into the general well-being of social work students; and continuing personal exploration and evaluation of value walking.
Conclusion

This practicum placement occurred at Sturgeon Lake First Nation through the Sturgeon Lake Heath Centre and the Lloyd Johnson Healing Lodge. My relationship building with the community of Sturgeon Lake began many years before my practicum commenced. This allowed time for trust and respect to develop and for the development of an ethical space (Ermine 2004).

This research practicum allowed me to fulfill three objectives. First, through my placement, I dismantled my assumptions, biases, and resistances about First Nation People, culture, spiritual practice, and worldview. I learned that the Indigenous worldview is ancient and is shared across races and locations that have existed before time. Second, I learned to know what an Indigenous worldview is and how this informs social work and mental health practice. The knowing of Indigenous worldview came about through experiences of cultural teachings and ceremonies with Sturgeon Lake First Nation. What I found was my experience resulted in my personal growth in well-being and mental health. Third, I learned to better assist individuals experiencing mental, emotional, and/or spiritual disharmony. This is being fulfilled with the youth at Sturgeon Lake First Nation through the program Mamāhtāwisīwin. Fulfilling these objectives was a spiritual journey.

The spiritual journey involved “value walking” from Western values and a worldview to an Indigenous worldview and values; in this report I reviewed literature on both. The literature review allowed the reader to know where I walked from and to where I walked. Also, I reviewed the literature on being highly sensitive. I work with many clients who are highly sensitive and I found there are many similarities between those who are highly sensitive and the Indigenous worldview and values. Those who are highly sensitive experience the world in a more connected way, are empathetic, are interested in spiritual paths, enjoy more peace and reflection time, feel
connected to nature and experience more “altered states of consciousness”. Therefore, Indigenous values of connectedness, non-aggression, cooperation, spirituality, caring for the earth, and ceremony fits well for those who are highly sensitive. These values also fit well for me as someone who is highly sensitive.

To tell the story of my experience with “value walking” I used the autoethnography methodology. Autoethnography concerns itself with research that makes the world a better place, is accountable to the researcher and participants, and is a balance between the scientific knowledge and the arts. The findings from my research practicum were discussed through the art of story telling.

I told a story of the walking from three Western values of the individual, time based on the clock, and competition to three Indigenous values of the collective, time based on nature, and collaboration. I experienced “value walking” during my research practicum. It was a spiritual journey.

In the discussion of findings section, I explored similarities between my spiritual journey and the spiritual journey of three other individuals. When comparing spiritual journeys, I found some common threads. First, an individual is breaking down a worldview that does not serve them anymore; second, an individual becomes aware of their connectedness to something greater than themselves; and third, people describe feeling better about themselves and their life after the journey. I experienced all of this in my research practicum.

I found the findings to be most influential for social work’s value of competency; specifically the competency of working with clients who are “highly sensitive”; competency of working with communities from cultures who promote sensitivity; and competency of being a healthy helper.
The issue of competency raised three recommendations including: research into whether experiential knowledge of Indigenous worldview and value is beneficial for others who are sensitive and maybe for those who are not sensitive; research on the wellbeing of social work students and the need to address wellness at a university level; and to continue to deepen my personal experience with Indigenous worldviews and values for myself and for the clients I serve.

Through the exploration and sharing of this personal spiritual journey, my hope was that this story offers support and hope to others, especially for highly sensitive people, and those with an Indigenous worldview and values. I believe that the sharing of my journey between worldviews will contribute insight about a path towards bridging cultures in the profession of social work.
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A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY


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