

# **THE KNOWLEDGE SEEKER**



# THE KNOWLEDGE SEEKER

EMBRACING  
INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY

**BLAIR STONECHILD**

*Foreword by Noel Starblanket*



**University of Regina Press**

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*To Danny Musqua  
and other Indigenous Elders  
who struggle to preserve spirituality*



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# FOREWORD

**D**r. Blair Stonechild asked me to write this foreword in order to express my understanding of the need in Indigenous academia for the publication of this type of book. I have perused the manuscript with great care and have taken the time to gain clear understanding of its contents before it was sent to the publisher. I have called upon all of my mentoring from my Elders, their teachings, and my own many years of spiritual learning in order to ascertain the premise and conclusions of this undertaking. I prayed about this. I proffer this opinion now in the hope that you will understand the reasoning for supporting the work that has gone into book.

I have known Dr. Stonechild for many years and am intricately familiar with his life pursuits. He is a most careful and studious academic in all of his endeavours, as evidenced in three very successful previous books. Throughout his tenure, he has worked assiduously to make his research useful and meaningful not only for his Indigenous students but also for the general readership. And most importantly he has engaged Indigenous Knowledge Keepers in order to prepare the wisdom he is sharing. He has been totally honest about, as well as dedicated to, the truths passed to him by Elders.

I understand the reluctance by many spiritual followers to write about sacred First Nations spiritual concepts, ceremonies, and

practices. I also know that much of this knowledge is traditionally passed down orally from spiritual mentors, be they family mentors or Old Ones who have been approached with the proper Indigenous protocols. That is the manner in which I also acquired much of my spiritual understanding. To my knowledge Blair has also done that. There may be some disagreement about some of the interpretations or conclusions in the book. However, I would like to state my point of view that this treatise does not offend any of those protocols. Equally there are those First Nations Elders who believe that in this age of “Education Is Our New Buffalo” spiritual information needs to be researched and documented to meet the needs of the younger generation that is crying out, nay, clamouring for this type of publication.

I perform a lot of work at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels on behalf of the Office of the Treaty Commissioner, Regina Public Schools, and the University of Regina. It is now mandatory to teach about Indigenous history, world view and Treaty agreements in these institutions in the Province of Saskatchewan. Many of the teachings are harsh truths, and deep spiritual understandings of Indigenous peoples are often difficult for non-Indigenous teachers and students to digest. I always preface my presentations by saying that although my presentations speak to harsh realities, they are no less true, and that these are not my opinions but are based in documented history. While non-Indigenous people should not have to feel guilty, they do need to recognize that they have been in denial for so many decades.

Many spiritual concepts can never be effectively transcribed in the English language from their original Indigenous tongue. Therefore, unless one is a spiritual practitioner and a fluent Indigenous language speaker, one cannot ever hope to totally and comprehensively grasp, much less fully explain, them on the written page. Yet I admonish anyone who will listen that one can read about spiritual philosophy from Knowledge Keepers and that it is a good thing. At the same time there is nothing that can ever replace actual attendance at spiritual ceremony with open mindedness, respect, and homage to protocol. This book sends the same message. Therefore I submit that no boundary is crossed and no protocol is breached

when one reads the research and documentation of Indigenous spiritual concepts in this book.

Dr. Blair Stonechild recognizes the limits of the human intellect in the description of spiritual concepts but has attempted to do so with total mindfulness. He realizes the invaluable wealth of Indigenous knowledge and research here in Saskatchewan and the need to share it with the entire global village. That our own Indigenous institution of higher learning, the First Nations University of Canada, promotes such learning is something that we should applaud, encourage, and support.

May Our Great Father imbue your spirit, heart, and mind with generosity, kindness, and understanding.

*Kinanâskomitinâwâw niwâhkômâkanak êkwa mîna nitôtêm awa.  
Miywâsin ôma masinahikan.*

Noel Starblanket  
Regina, Saskatchewan



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I am indebted to Elders with whom I have worked or interviewed at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, later First Nations University of Canada. I thank the late Velma Goodfeather, Barry Ahenakew, Rick Favel, Joe Naytowhow, Tyrone Tootoosis, Eber Hampton, Ray Lavallee, Walter and Maria Linklater, Delbert Pasqua, Vicki Wilson, and Leonzo Barreno for providing interviews that have contributed to my understanding of First Nations spirituality. I recall Solomon Mosquito, Jim Ryder, Willie Peigan, James Iron eagle, Dr. Ahab and Betty Spence, Tony and Emma Sand, Ken Goodwill, Beatrice Lavallee, Isadore Pelletier, and other Elders who have each helped me to gain greater understanding and appreciation for Indigenous metaphysics. Without their help, this book would not be possible.

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I am especially fortunate to have the support of my family: my late mother, Lucy; my wonderful wife, Sylvia, who spent countless, invaluable hours transcribing interviews and providing feedback; and my children, Michael, Rachel, and Gabrielle, and extended family.

Finally, I am indebted to my esteemed mentor, Elder Danny Musqua, whom I call *Mosôm* (grandfather)—a term of endearment and respect. He shared the philosophy, laws, and disciplines that deepen our relationship with the ethereal world. He also shared with me the significance of ceremonies. During my conversations with *Mosôm*, when I sought him out in order to have him clarify the

meaning of his teachings, he would tell me, “You are on the right track.” He entrusted me to interpret the meaning of his words to the best of my ability. It is my hope the reader will agree with what I found in these interviews: that the message of Indigenous spiritual knowledge is vital for everyone today. Any errors in interpretation are my responsibility alone.



# INTRODUCTION

I experienced the entire range of First Nations education, from Indian residential school to an integrated city high school to mainstream university at McGill in Montreal. The residential school had a major impact on my early years and the way in which I perceived the world. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, established to investigate the effects of the schools, concluded that “students were estranged from their families and communities, cultural, *spiritual* and language transmission” (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> I hope this book will contribute to the recovery of Indigenous spirituality.

I am fortunate to have participated in the establishment of the first Indigenous-controlled post-secondary institutions in Canada: Manitou College and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, now First Nations University of Canada. The more I studied Indigenous history, the more I realized how much Indigenous culture and spirituality were lost and had to be recovered. That knowledge resides in the memory and oral tradition of First Nations Elders.

I became interested in a little-known aspect of First Nations beliefs: reincarnation or rebirth. Research in this area led me to a broader exploration of Indigenous sacred philosophy. Through my work at First Nations University of Canada, I worked with many Elders who shared their insights with me. I approached mentors using traditional protocol and asked them to address questions

such as: What is the purpose for life? How does one foster a healthy lifestyle? What are the ways to the development of spirituality? My interviews with these Elders were recorded and transcripts made in accordance with university ethics requirements.

An Elder is an individual recognized by the Indigenous community as having earned wisdom through life experience and who has become an expert in an area of knowledge or practice. There are various types of Elders. Some may be known as Knowledge Keepers, who have the right to pass on accounts of sacred stories or other information; ceremonialists, generally called “pipe carriers,” play a key role in First Nations spirituality; medicine people might be male or female and have the gift of bringing about healing attained through individual effort of prayer, fasting, ceremonial revelation, or dream. They pray when called upon and conduct various types of ceremonies. Others are specialists in using herbal medicines. The community and other medicine people monitor the use of healing gifts to ensure they are used for the good of all and not for selfish reasons.

I am recognized as a Knowledge Keeper, but I do not claim to be an infallible source on sacrosanct topics. Every Elder I have met has had something unique to offer. My purpose is to articulate concepts of sacred heritage in order that our people and others will better understand and appreciate the coherence and complexity of an Indigenous belief system. Such teachings were not traditionally shared outside ceremonial contexts. However, progressive Elders recognize that times have changed and it is important to share their insights now. Modern tools, such as books, can facilitate understanding of their ways. There will be areas that can be clarified or expanded upon more, and I invite other Knowledge Keepers to do so. I do not purport to try to convert anyone to any particular belief, as traditional practice is very flexible. Neither is this book about performing ceremonies.

Listening to many First Nation sages has helped me to understand the position Indigenous peoples find themselves in today. Old World cultures had travelled a long voyage down what is regarded as “civilization.” Without going into a never-ending discussion and debate as to what exactly transpired, I argue here that a fundamentally different approach was taken in Europe for the development

of their civilizations. This approach placed humanity at the centre of Creation, with all the other components of the natural world relegated to the margins. This tradition can be traced back to the emergence of anthropocentric cultures nurtured by the Greeks and Romans, and institutionalized in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious traditions. The essence of these belief systems, encoded in particular scriptures—whether found in the Torah, Bible, or Koran—have come to be regarded as the final and infallible “divine word.” Legal, economic, and social systems of these societies are constructed upon these foundations.

In contrast, belief systems of the New World—or of Turtle Island, as it is commonly called by Indigenous peoples of the Americas—are based on the belief that humans are not the centre of Creation. Rather, humans are one aspect of a created world and, because of their dependence on other kingdoms of life (animal, vegetable, or mineral), they are considered to be among the most vulnerable. Fundamental to this world view is that *all entities*—whether animal, plant, reptile, insect, and even what others consider to be inanimate objects—have life, energy, and supernal significance. In other words, *all entities* in this world—animate and inanimate—are purposeful *beings* in their own right.

Indigenous peoples believe that kinship exists with all things. Failing to apply this simple, foundational principle is at the root of many modern problems, including the degradation of the natural world (which is the reason for the pollution of air and water), climate change, and the loss of plant and animal habitats. The further back in time that archaeologists and anthropologists go in the study of the development of Old World societies, the more they recognize that all civilizations were built upon Aboriginal-like foundations. Therefore, taking another look at First Nations beliefs is worthwhile: doing so will shed light on our current existential dilemmas.

### *Spirituality versus Religion*

An important distinction is to be made between *spirituality* and *religion*. *Spirituality* involves direct engagement and connection with

the mysteries of the transcendent. It is the responsibility of each individual to pursue this enterprise. More experienced mentors can guide and give advice, but will not dictate what and how the spiritual quest unfolds.

*Religion* is characterized by a belief system defined in rigid written texts, such as the Torah, Bible, or Koran. The ordinary person's relationship with the sacred is mediated by interpreters, be they priest or rabbi. Individuals are discouraged from straying from scripture and can be persecuted for unsanctioned spiritual revelation. It is heretical to deny the Pope's infallibility or to impose one's own interpretation of scripture. One inhibition is that humans cannot reach out to God through mortal effort alone. Mystical aspects are considered "hidden" from ordinary knowledge, and adherents are to defer to church authorities. Such restrictions discourage exploration by the congregant.<sup>2</sup>

This distinction between spirituality and religion is not intended to be a condemnation of religion, which legitimately attempts to codify divine laws. A problem arises when spiritual laws become inflexible, discourage individuals from seeking ecstatic experience, and are unable to respond to intractable questions. For example, the commandment "Thou shalt not steal," in some cases, becomes ignored out of necessity by those in desperate straits.

Aboriginal people spend an inordinate amount of life undergoing sacrifice, seeking visions and dreams, and learning prayers, songs, and rituals in order to access the ethereal. Knowledge earned only at a "human level" is considered as inferior. If a person does not have dreams, visions, and connections to spirit power, he or she is viewed as somehow deficient.

Reverence is important in terms of seeking wisdom from the Ancestors, with whom we communicate through ceremonies. Sacred connections with animal, plant, and inanimate worlds confirm that all created things are interrelated; indeed, humans, more than any other beings, are dependent on others for survival. Spirituality enables people to constantly heal themselves and repair relationships. One might say that the reason for the development of written history was to keep track of all unhealed past events—something that Indigenous peoples do not need, because healing is continuous.

As discussed throughout this book, the purpose of spirits who arrive on earth as humans is to learn how to become virtuous beings by living the “good life” or “following the Red Road.” Necessary laws to follow are gifted by *Kisē-Manitow*. Indigenous peoples keep this ethical system alive through focus on ceremonial activity.

Elder Mike Pinay told me a story about attending the World Multicultural Gathering in Toronto in 1994. There, it was deemed that Indigenous peoples of North America retained spirituality more than any other group. This, despite the fact that, in non-Indigenous worlds, a real understanding of Indigenous tribal practices has been obscured by the preoccupation with spirit possession, something used to vilify those Aboriginal traditions.<sup>3</sup> Yet, today’s Indigenous communities struggle to maintain the spiritual aspect; colonialism has so severely damaged Indigenous cultures and economies that there is too often an absence of spirit, overlooking the fact that it is an integral part of a balanced society.

### *Recovering Spirituality*

Survivors of Indian residential schools have struggled, with varying degrees of success, to recover their lost spiritual heritage. Attempts to restore spiritual understanding in today’s world is challenging in the face of exceedingly powerful and entrenched forces. These include exploitative economic systems that aid and abet slavish adherence to materialism. The purpose of humans in this system is to be useful cogs in the economic machine. They are schooled largely to obtain the skills necessary to work, and once they are adults their primary identification becomes their occupation. The best one can hope for after such a sojourn is retirement made comfortable through accumulated savings, something that is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. Little serious thought or consideration is given to the idea that after a life spiritually lived, another cycle begins that carries one to new heights in the supernal world.

Spiritual practice evolves according to changing circumstances and needs of humanity. For example, ceremonies Indigenous peoples undertook in pre-contact times are modified by the necessity to

suit modern times; language use is different and new technologies come into play. But, while surface practices may change according to circumstances, the underlying purpose—the necessity to develop a meaningful relationship with spirit through dedicated and direct efforts—does not change.

In her timely book *Nationhood Interrupted*, Sylvia McAdam describes the reluctance of committing spiritual wisdom to writing: “Elders clearly stated that only physical laws and not spiritual laws could be written down.”<sup>4</sup> There are good reasons for this, including the fact that an individual is generally not thought to achieve mental and emotional maturity until well into adulthood and after experience and successes at life, such as raising a family. The spiritual seeker follows extensive protocol and long apprenticeship before being deemed ready to hear about the deeper mysteries of spirituality and how to properly apply them.

*Mosôm* Danny told me that Knowledge Keepers should now use modern technologies to preserve and promote insight into the transcendent. He stated that one should not fear modern approaches, but rather embrace them.

The old people tell us there will be a time when there will be people who can recapture our way of knowing in books. Now we can write about them [the Elders] with that knowledge system that our brothers from foreign countries across the ocean brought with them. We have to capture back the stories of the old people before we lose them all. We have to encourage our young people, our writers and our university students, our doctoral and master’s students, to help us to capture back those stories one more time in order that we can pass on to the world the way of peace. I believe you are one of those writers.<sup>5</sup>

Staring at me intently, *Mosôm* asked, “What is your purpose?” Answering his own question, he said, “The answer is there in front of you. It’s already been set, you know. You are here to be a professor, a researcher, a writer. Your purpose is to reveal these ideas regarding the journey of the spirit. It is your mission to write about these teachings.”<sup>6</sup>

I got the message—*Mosôm* wanted me to write a book about our people’s spiritual teachings. At the last ceremony I attended with him before he retired from First Nations University, I promised him it would be written.

*The Knowledge Seeker* is not intended to offer the story of my life. Although my story provides a framework for relating the material, the book focuses on the sacred wisdom of Indigenous Elders. The title suggests that everyone needs to seek knowledge that will lead to a more spiritual life. This book does not claim to be a definitive description of spirituality of Plains Cree and Saulteaux. It is merely intended to raise awareness and create discussion. Traditionally, it was the practice to introduce such ideas to youth in order to launch them on a spiritually meaningful path.

It is necessary to caution in these deeply materialistic times that some individuals will exploit spiritual practices for base purposes, especially for making money. There is the example, for instance, of the American “self-help guru” James Ray, who operated a sweat lodge that killed three people in 2009. The sweat lodge did not have sanction from Indigenous Elders.

Humankind must realize the need to apply spiritual principles to how we live. This is an immense challenge and one wonders whether humanity is up to it. But, at the spiritual level, whether de-secularization happens or not, eventually as spirit beings we all find our way back to the Creator—as *Mosôm* Danny reassured me.

• • •

Terminology about Indigenous peoples used in this book may be confusing, given the plethora of terms available. The particular interpretation in this book comes primarily from Saulteaux and Plains Cree spirituality and law, as I understand it. I use some terms interchangeably, including *First Nations*, a commonly used contemporary term derived from Canadian Indigenous political resurgence; *Aboriginal*, although it is generally associated with government usage in constitutional and legal contexts, and includes Métis and Inuit Nations; and the word most currently in use, *Indigenous*, which, with its more

flexible meaning, is defined by the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (second edition) as “originating naturally in a region.”

In chapter 1, “Wanting to Know,” I situate myself as an Indigenous person who attended the Qu’Appelle Indian Residential School in Lebret, Saskatchewan, and then went on to pursue higher education at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Chapter 2, “Controlling Our Education,” describes my involvement and experience in establishing First Nations-controlled post-secondary institutions at Manitou Community College and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now First Nations University of Canada).

The ensuing chapters deal with three main areas of First Nations spiritual philosophy. First, the fundamental nature of human existence is that we are spirit beings, and why and how we came to inhabit the earth is the subject of chapter 3, “The Great Principle.” The second subject, discussed in chapter 4, “The Great Law,” is the spiritual imperative compelling human beings to establish healthy and respectful relationships among themselves and with all created beings. These spiritual teachings are passed on through the family and community and are essential to social and political cohesion. The third area, focused on in chapter 5, “Once Powerful Healing,” is the traditional application of spirituality in both personal and community healing.

As an historian of Aboriginal policies, I realized that a reconsideration of Indigenous history and politics is necessary if the supernal foundation of traditional culture is to be fully appreciated. Spirituality comprises an important basis for Aboriginal interaction, something that historians and anthropologists with their limited understanding rarely incorporate in their accounts. This aspect is discussed in chapter 6, “Re-evaluating the Past.”

The crisis at First Nations University from 2005 to 2011 deserves to be written about, as there are important lessons to be learned about spirituality and education. The events demonstrated a departure from the bilingual–bicultural approach envisioned by the university’s founders and which created the institution’s original success. Interference in the institution led to an abandonment of traditional mores of behaviour. The importance of learning from this episode and the need to respect traditional values in a modern context are the subject of chapter 7, “Contemporary Crisis.”

During the course of my research on First Nations metaphysics, I had an opportunity to link Indigenous traditional tutelage with contemporary research at institutions such as the University of Virginia's School of Medicine, where important research on the objectivity of "spirit" or "consciousness" is underway. This research reveals parallels to First Nations concepts of the transcendent, as found in world-leading research on reincarnation by Dr. Ian Stevenson and Dr. Jim Tucker, and by Dr. Antonia Mills of the University of Northern British Columbia. As well, Dr. Bruce Greyson, an expert in research on near-death experiences, is investigating evidence that consciousness exists independently of the physical body and brain. These ideas, discussed in chapter 8, "Modern Study of Spirit," support similar ideas of Elders.

There are important applications of metaphysics in education. The study of spirituality is central to an institution such as First Nations University of Canada, since First Nations people believe that holistic education encompasses physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects. Spirituality is considered to be the foundation of all aspects of education; it is particularly important to provide guidance to youth in today's materialistic world. Chapter 9, "Restoring Balance," discusses how Indigenous spirituality can be incorporated into today's curricula in areas such as healing, psychology, social work, and justice. This type of new development in our curricula will help pave the way for implementing recommendations made recently by the Truth and Reconciliation commissioners, including to decolonize spirituality.

The book's epilogue, "Creator Does Not Lose His Children," ends with words of wisdom and hope that, despite challenges, Indigenous spirituality holds the key for transforming our future.

In rejuvenating Indigenous knowledge, faculty at First Nations University are encouraged to research from a basis of traditional culture, but to also go beyond that to incorporate research and knowledge from non-Indigenous systems as well. This intention informs the approach and premise of this book. It is hoped that *The Knowledge Seeker: Recovering Indigenous Spirituality* will lead to many important and lively discussions concerning the importance—and urgency—of recovering and reviving spirituality in our daily life.