

CHAPTER 1

Passion within the First Nations Social Work Profession

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Dexter Kinequon

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, Elders, guests and colleagues. I am very pleased and honoured to provide the opening keynote address for this year's Prairie Child Welfare Symposium. I am aware of the amount of work the symposium organizers have put into this event in order to make it a memorable and useful experience for each of you, so in keeping with that effort, I will try and do my part and give you a thought-provoking and interesting presentation. When I was asked last year to make this presentation, I thought it was an excellent opportunity to discuss something that is important to me, and that is the concept of passion, and the role it plays in the delivery of human services, specifically in the context of the First Nations social work profession.

As I reviewed my material for this presentation, I thought I would

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provide some insight into my own personal experiences growing up, in order that you may begin to understand passion as I see it from my perspective and how those experiences molded the passion I feel today. It's not always easy speaking of a difficult past, but sometimes it is necessary and beneficial that we do look at what has made us the people that we are, and why we sometimes act in the way we do, and of course to learn from each other's experience as well. It's also equally important to respect the experiences of others, and in this regard I had asked the symposium organizers not to record my presentation. I am not concerned that my words would be heard elsewhere, my reasons are rather that I came here to speak directly to those of you present this evening.¹

One of the objectives of my presentation here this evening is to lead each of you to think about your own passion and what it personally means to you. How were you influenced to be doing the work that each of you are involved in, and what goals have you set for yourselves with respect to that passion? When we consider passion in the abstract sense, we have to begin with our own simple understanding of it. According to the literal written meaning in Webster's dictionary, passion is described as an emotional response. The English word "passion" itself comes from the Greek word "pathos" and this word means something that happens to you, either good or bad, usually something bad or something you suffer. From this interpretation the word more commonly came to mean a feeling that you suffer or "a passionate desire."

Over the course of this past year, since I agreed to speak here this evening, I have given much thought to interpreting my own passion, and how that passion has motivated me in my own social work career. When I begin to reflect on my own passion, I begin by looking at my own life and how I have been transformed into the person I am based on the experiences I had as a child, and later in adulthood as an educated First Nations human services professional.

For the purposes of this presentation I begin by reaching back in time to an incident that occurred in the summer of 1975. In the summer of that year, I was twelve years old and my home, like many First Nations

1 EDITOR'S NOTE: While Mr. Kinequon's request that his presentation not be recorded was honoured, he did agree to provide his speaking notes so that they could appear here in this publication.

homes, was devastated by the impacts of the residential school system. Although there had always been violence in my home I was probably considered too young to be directly involved in the physical aspect of the violence in our home.

However, that all changed in 1975, as I was almost a teenager. I believe the perception was that I had become old enough to be a combatant and would directly participate in the violent altercations that were part of my family life. Finally, the violence in my home escalated to the point that I felt I had to flee, fearing for my own safety.

Although I had left my home I had not left my town. At first, I continued to go play with my friends at their houses, and hung out like nothing was going on. I had concealed my circumstances well enough from my friends and their families that they were totally unaware that anything was wrong. I continued to act like I always did and played with my friends and stayed at their houses on sleepovers just as I had always done. I was usually careful not to spend more than a day or two at each friend's home. After I left, I would then move on to the next friend's house. Since my friends' parents very seldom spoke to each other about us kids, no one was aware of my circumstances and I drew no attention, until eventually the sleepovers became too frequent and the parents of my friends became suspicious and said I could not sleepover for awhile and would have to go home.

Since I had run out of places to stay in my hometown, I then walked to another town close to ours that was eight miles away. I had a cousin who lived there, and also several other friends. So just as I had done in my hometown, I followed the same procedure and began sleeping at their houses until eventually that caught up to me as well. One by one each of their parents said I could not play at their house anymore and would have to go home. I remember the first evening I had no place to stay. I had been walking around town and was very hungry since I had not eaten that day. I contemplated my situation and knew I needed to take drastic action to deal with my present circumstances.

Finally, after some confusing deliberation, I made a fateful decision to commit a crime, get some money and skip town. In the town I was in, I had seen a small shop that had a window that faced the back of a dark alley. Once that I thought everyone in town had gone to bed, I approached the back of the building, keeping to the shadows as much as I could, then

when I reached the window, I took a big breath to calm myself, and then as quietly as I could, I broke the window with a rock, climbed through, found the money drawer and took what was in it.

As I ran from the scene of the crime, I had overwhelming feelings of fear, guilt and shame, which were only later abated by my miserable set of circumstances. As I walked around that night thinking of what I done, I shook not only from the fear I felt over my previous actions, but also from the cold. Since it was getting later in the summer, it was becoming colder at night. So, needing a place to hide and keep warm I went from building to building until I found a door open and huddled in the entrance way until morning.

That next morning I immediately went to the café and ordered the biggest breakfast they had on the menu. Later on, I went walking around town trying to come up with a plan of what I was going to do and where I could go next. Suddenly a car drove up beside me and it was the police. I instantly froze, paralyzed by fear. The officer told me to get in and upon sitting down he said he wanted to see the bottom of my shoes. I showed him my shoes and he compared my runner print to a Polaroid photograph in his hand. As he showed me the matching prints, I knew I was busted. Of course he asked me why I had broke into the store, and I said because I needed the money to buy food. I thought since I was caught there was no point in trying to lie.

The officer then drove back to the shop where I saw the storeowner and his wife standing outside looking at the window. As I approached the owner, I could see that he was absolutely furious. I walked up to him and extended my hand with the remaining money I had taken. The storeowner snatched the money from my hand and I could see he was so angry I thought he was going to strike me right there where I stood.

And his wife—the poor woman was crying so hard she almost could not speak. She then came over to me and kneeled down in front of me and took my face in her hands and in a begging manner asked “Why? Why would you steal from us? Why?” When she continued to plead for an answer, I finally could not take it any longer and with a lump in my throat and tears welling up in my eyes, I pushed myself away from her and in the most defiant voice I could muster, I said, “Because you have everything and I have nothing.” *Because I have nothing!* Ladies and gentlemen, that was a defining moment in my life. This situation I found

myself in seemed to crystallize the difference between me as an Indian kid and the three white people beside me, and the different worlds we existed in.

After that, I went to the police officer's car and jumped in and sat there with my head against the window, crying at the experience I just had. Eventually, the officer came and got into the car and began driving away from the store. At this point, I thought I was being taken to jail or to wherever they take kids who commit crimes. Instead, the officer asked me if there was someplace he could take me to. In a barely audible whisper, I said, "Nowhere," I said, "I have no place left to go."

I think that because the officer was not sure what to do, he started driving back to my hometown. Along the way, the officer asked me if I would like to go and see someone about my situation. I said, "Sure." It sounded optimistic and I had no other options. The officer then said there was a person who came to our town once a week for two hours. He said she was a social worker and she may be able to help me. He went on to say that although she had been at our town earlier that day and was now gone, she would be back the following week. He said if I wanted, he would go with me to see her. As this sounded fairly positive, I agreed to the idea. Once again the officer asked me where he could take me, and I said to take me out to the highway and I would hitchhike to Saskatoon for the week and then meet him back in town next week.

The officer then drove me to the highway, and as we said good-bye I once again affirmed that I would see him in one week. As I started walking down the highway, I turned to look back over my shoulder as the officer drove back to town, and I wondered, "If I had been a white child, would he still have left me on that road?" This occurrence seemed to confirm that we did live in different worlds, and that there were different police for Indians than for everyone else.

I began walking and eventually hitchhiked to Saskatoon, which was about 150 miles from my hometown. Ladies and gentlemen, I can say without a doubt that the next seven days were the longest days I will probably ever live through. I remember one night lying in some tall grass curled up like an unborn child and crying so hard I felt inconsolable.

And I probably would have been except for some things that I noticed. I noticed the ground was keeping me warm from the previous day's sun, and the wind was blowing like someone would when they

are breathing. That wind would blow the grass in a way that would be indicative of taking in a breath, and then the wind would almost exhale and each time this occurred, the long grass would bend covering me one way and then covering me up when it went the other way. In this way the grass kept me concealed, and I felt protected from the dangers that were all around me. I suppose you could say this is one of those moments where I thought I felt and experienced a physical relationship between myself and Mother Earth, and I was thankful for it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have not told you this story this evening to make you sad, or to bring about any ill feelings to any people. You may think this story involves a unique situation, or an extraordinary set of circumstances, but it does not. If you were to ask almost any First Nations person here if they knew of a story like this one, they would probably be able to say yes.

When I spoke to the store owner's wife about having nothing, I was not just talking about having no food, shelter or basic necessities. I was talking about having a home that had love, nurturing, security and especially hope for the future for me as an Indian kid. This is a part of where my passion comes from. Having lived through that experience was so difficult, sometimes I just want to leave it as far away as possible. But I am unable to because this is one of the experiences that has molded my own sense of passion.

I believe there are numerous kinds of passion in this world. I think some people have a form of intellectual passion which is based on what they think is a good thing, and they educate themselves into positions where they can work with disadvantaged people and they are fulfilled by this type of work. There is nothing wrong with this kind of passion because we need helpers and leaders of all kinds, and disadvantaged children need all the help each of us is willing to give them. Another kind of passion, which is not better, just different, is the emotional kind of passion, where you feel it from your heart and the core of your soul, and is based on experiences you have had and drives you to make every effort you can to help children. The emotional passion is the passion I live with, and is the motivating factor in my day-to-day social work practice. I see children who come from abusive homes and I understand their pain, and the fearful anxiety they are experiencing, and I know what they are going through.

If we fast-track to today, here, right now, you would probably think life is different for me now. As a successful, working First Nations professional, I should have a strong sense of personal security and well-being. And I do, most times. However, there are times when this does not occur. For example there was a series of national events over the past years that have led me to continue feeling like I had when I was twelve years old.

It began with a September 2006 presentation I made to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights on behalf of Saskatchewan Native Child Welfare. I had conducted research for this presentation and when I had completed the presentation, I felt uneasy with what I saw. In my report, I stated that First Nations people had initially been optimistic when the Canadian government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This meant that First Nations *thought* that there would be some recognition finally, that the involuntary and disproportionate removal of thousands of First Nations children from their homes was unacceptable—and they thought this recognition would pave the way for new initiatives to deal with First Nations issues. But nothing meaningful occurred as a result of the ratification.

And then subsequent to the United Nations Ratification, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was completed in November 1996. Upon review, I found that the completed report had been exhaustive and thorough; however, I found very little of the Commission Report's recommendations were ever followed through. And then more recently in 2006, there were commitments made to First Nations people by the federal government through the Kelowna Accord. This would have meant much needed funding for capacity building in First Nations communities across Canada. Once again First Nations hopes were raised in futility.

When the new federal government came into power, all commitments, including the Kelowna Accord, were withdrawn and that government said they would make their own plan and they would have their own strategies on how to deal with the First Nations people of Canada. Earlier this spring, the federal government displayed their new initiatives for First Nations people in the federal budget.

I remember listening to the budget attentively, and was more than dismayed when I heard the investment amount the government was putting into First Nations communities. After the budget was announced, I searched newspapers, newscasts and other media to find the moral

outrage that the citizens of Canada would express at the slap in the face First Nations people had just received from the federal government.

As I searched I found no response. Instead, all I could find was a deafening silence and quiet acceptance by the people of Canada. Considering that nothing was being said about the inadequate funding to First Nations across Canada, I then thought I would turn to one of my non-native friends and see if there was support at the local level. When I spoke to my friend and expressed my issue with the funding inequity for Indian and Northern Affairs, my friend made no comment, and instead said, "Well, it's good for the middle-class family," and he said nothing more and did not look at me after he said it. Then all of a sudden my words from 1975 came back to me, "because I have nothing."

You see, even though my own needs have been met by my career, the needs of my people, have not, and therefore I continue to suffer the passion of my people. This is one of those situations that can work at diminishing a First Nations professional's passion for the work they are trying to do. We go to school to become educated in child welfare and then begin applying our skills, only to find we often feel like we are working with one hand tied behind our backs. Tied there by an arrogant federal government unwilling to effectively deal with the social issues facing First Nations people.

Then to add insult to injury, I watched as the Minister of Indian Affairs defended his government's budget by standing up in parliament and yelling that the problem for First Nations was not inadequate funding, but it was what the First Nations were doing with the money they were getting in the first place, that was the problem. Unfortunately, this is the same minister who publicly threatened First Nations people by saying if any First Nations used any federal funds to stage a protest against the Government on June 21, Aboriginal Day, they would have their books audited.

We are currently faced with a federal government today that continues to treat First Nations people as second-class citizens in our own country. Earlier this year I was reading a section of Canada's draft *Military Counterinsurgency Manual*, where it states that, "despite its specific and limited aims, the First Nations rebellions in Canada are nevertheless insurgencies because they are animated by the goal of altering political relationships with both the Canadian government and at the local

level—within reservations themselves—through the threat of or use of violence.” So, it appears that First Nations people are to be considered potential terrorists in our own country if we stand up too tall for our rights.

What does this have to do with passion for child welfare, you may be thinking? Well, this continued federal oppression weakens the First Nations professional and the organizations they work for. I truly believe, and I told this to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, that I genuinely believe the federal government has no vision for First Nations people, let alone First Nations child welfare. I think they would just like to see the Indian problem disappear.

I see First Nations social workers come into this social work environment, and they come with fire in their eyes and a passionate desire to make changes for First Nations children. Over time you see the passion begin to fade as they struggle within the bureaucracy and become consumed by a system that will not allow First Nations to build the capacity they need to improve child welfare. Eventually, the flame fades and it’s difficult to watch as people leave First Nations social work tired and burnt out.

However, I must qualify my statements on the federal government, though, by saying that not all people within the Department of Indian Affairs are at the root cause of the issue. I know many that I believe really do want to help First Nations make positive changes, but most times their system will simply not allow them to.

I believe the federal government is capable of developing more supportive policies and should consider more partnership opportunities with the provincial governments. When you consider both levels of government are involved in on-reserve child welfare services you would think there would be more joint initiatives. Unfortunately, it seems that the federal and provincial governments continue to debate child welfare responsibility and would rather point fingers at each other than try to work more closely.

Speaking of the provincial government, I would say that over the past several years, I have come to consider the provincial Department of Community Resources [now the Ministry of Social Services] as a partner in the delivery of First Nations child welfare services in Saskatchewan. Of course there is still much work we need to do together. I sometimes

get the impression that the Saskatchewan provincial government does not know what to do with the First Nations in this province.

My perceptions lead me to believe that the Department wants to get out of First Nations child welfare as quickly as possible in order to eliminate the liability associated with on-reserve child welfare services. However, until that day comes we need to work together in the best interest of children, and I think we have begun moving in that direction. Some examples of supportive initiatives from the Department of Community Resources include much-needed service training for the agencies; another extraordinary example is the current funding arrangement for the newly established Saskatchewan First Nations Family and Community Institute.

The list goes on, but I think I can say that I like the direction we are moving with Community Resources and the partnerships we have made, and if in the end, First Nations become totally responsible for their own child welfare, through self-government agreements, then so be it. But the province needs to relinquish its authority in an appropriate manner over time by laying the framework right now with the necessary resources to allow First Nations success in the future.

I also want to mention the third level of government here, and that is the First Nations governments in Saskatchewan. Unfortunately, this is also a level of government that can be sometimes equally frustrating for First Nations professionals. We have situations where agencies and their directors and boards come into conflict with the political leadership. We take the heat when we apprehend a child, and we take the heat when we do not apprehend children. I have seen directors fight battles with their own political leaders and either give in, leave, or they are cast aside. I would think that these leaders would want to support their professionals to every extent that they could, to ensure the programs and services the agencies are responsible for are supported and of the highest quality.

So with all these examples of situations that can impact on a First Nations professional's passion, you can see how the current child welfare system can deteriorate and reduce the feelings of accomplishment and self-fulfillment in the careers of First Nations professionals. So when we begin to get dragged down by the situations we deal with on an ongoing basis, how do we go about recharging our passion? I think each person is different, and you have to explore within yourself how you will go about doing this, and what will work for you.

From my own past experience in social work, I know that when I get involved in projects or initiatives that directly improve children's services, I find hope for the future of child welfare and that adds value to my passion and allows me to continue working and pressing on.

As you listen here this evening, I think it is important that you understand that I do not pretend to stand up here and lead you to believe I know all the problems and issues in child welfare services. I do not have all the answers. I think I have some of the answers, but I also think that with all of us working together we can find the solutions to problems we are experiencing within First Nations child welfare, which essentially is one of the reasons why we are at this symposium.

Whenever I get a chance I like to discuss possible solutions to some of the issues we face today. I believe Canadian children need a federal children's commissioner. I believe if there was a national position that could look at how the federal government deals with children's issues, I think all children would have a stronger voice in this country, and would ensure that their rights and freedoms would be protected, and that the legislation, policies and program developments that pertain to them would contain the elements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Additionally, I think we need to have a federal children's commissioner to ensure that all children living on-reserve receive comparable services as those children living off-reserve.

Also I think there needs to be an inter-governmental forum that is charged with the responsibility of establishing a ten-year child welfare plan of action. I see this as a national think tank that could provide thoughtful recommendations on the future of child welfare to whatever government is in power.

There needs to be more thought given to the development of preventative programming and how we can intervene with families without removing children from their homes. We all know the success rate in family reunification programs goes down the longer children remain in care.

We also need to have some work conducted in the area of dispute resolution between the federal and provincial governments and the First Nations. Unfortunately, there have been incidents where children have suffered and died as a result of jurisdictional issues between governments. The issue appears to involve who is responsible for paying for services for any child whose jurisdiction has not been immediately determined.

A tragic example of this is based on an incident that has led to First Nations lobbying for federal and provincial approval of Jordan's Principle.² This is an incident that occurred in Manitoba and involved the death of a child named Jordan. Apparently, the federal and Manitoba provincial governments were in the middle of a funding dispute for two years, each saying the other was responsible for the high costs associated with this child's care upon his return to his home community. As the two levels of government disputed, Jordan could not be returned home because his high cost of care was not approved by either of the governments; therefore, Jordan languished in the hospital, waiting to go home. In the two years the federal and Manitoba provincial governments were arguing with each other, Jordan died, and although Jordan did eventually make it home, it was to be buried.

On the home front here, you may feel you are helpless to do anything about national issues that may seem out of your realm of influence. But if you look at the concept of passion for action which this symposium is focused on, you should look within yourselves and ask, "Am I doing all that I personally can for child welfare in this country, or am I doing only enough to make myself feel relatively comfortable?"

As citizens of Canada we each have a moral obligation to educate ourselves on social issues so we may be challenged to exercise our social responsibilities for the disadvantaged children that live among us, regardless of where they live. I often hear, mostly politicians, say that children are our future, and this is true, but I also believe that we are our children's future as well, and what we do right now will determine their futures.

As I conclude my remarks here this evening, I want to revisit the concept of passion that I have been using in my presentation. I say to each of you to look within yourselves and find what inspires you to be passionate about child welfare and to think, "What can I do today to improve the life of a child?" As I said previously, I do not know all the answers, but

2 EDITORS NOTE: Jordan's Principle, a child-first principle to resolving jurisdictional disputes, was approved unanimously by the House of Commons on December 12, 2007. The principle requires the provincial and federal governments to pay for the government services a child needs first and resolve the jurisdictional dispute later (Blackstock, 2007).

I know when I do respond to questions on child welfare, I provide all of my answers with passion.

I want to leave you this evening with a passage I read somewhere. These are not my words but those of a writer that I thought eloquently summarized my own feelings on passion. This writer wrote, "Passion is a gift of the spirit combined with the totality of all our experiences we've lived through. It endows each of us with the power to live and communicate with unbridled enthusiasm. Passion is most evident when the mind, body and spirit work together to create, develop and articulate or make manifest our feelings, ideas and most sacred values" (Norris, 2000).

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for listening to me this evening. I feel honored and privileged that you would find any of my words worthy of sitting and hearing publicly. I wish each of you all the best. And I bid you good evening.

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