



## **Wasauksing Women Sharing Strength**

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### **Abstract**

Wasauksing Women Sharing Strength explores the subject of Aboriginal birth knowledge from Wasauksing First Nation in Ontario. The intent is to document and generate positive representations of traditional birth knowledge in response to processes of colonization, which in the past have worked to silence them. Three Wasauksing mothers share their understandings of traditional birth knowledge and where the origins of their knowledges lie. A short video documentary accompanies the article. The author approaches the work from her own personal standpoint: that of a Native woman from Wasauksing First Nation seeking information about her identity as a new mother.

When I was pregnant with my son and living in Toronto, I sought out Aboriginal midwives to attend the home-birth. I looked to my midwives for guidance as I began to seek out traditional teachings and knowledge about the life-changing journey. It became apparent that my midwives and I were on the same journey. We were urban Aboriginal women, dislocated from our traditional territories seeking out traditional birth knowledge that had been

silenced by processes of colonization. I was grateful for simply having access to the Aboriginal midwives that were providing my care.

[2] The first summer after my son Zeegwon was born, my partner and I lived in a small trailer while building our cabin on my home reserve of Wasauksing First Nation. My father and many friends camped out with us to help. During that summer, I spent time talking with my father and my great-aunt Aileen Rice, otherwise known as Aunty-Soda, while my eight month old son learned to climb over rocks and gummed on fallen acorns (yikes!). Both my father and Aunty-Soda shared stories with me about my great-grandmother Lucy Tabobondung (Gran), who raised my father and who was also a midwife in our community. My Aunty-Soda told me that her generation was the first to leave the community to birth their babies in the hospital in the nearest town of Parry Sound, Ontario. Before that, midwives like Lucy attended births, which usually took place at home. It was the first time I heard about Gran being a midwife and the more they spoke of Gran, the more I realized how little I knew of her and our traditional birth knowledge.

[3] My desire to gain more knowledge and build a stronger connection with my cultural roots in Wasauksing deepened. It expanded to include new questions such as: What does it mean to be a 'life-giver'? I decided to focus

my Master's thesis research on traditional birth knowledge from Wasauksing First Nation and subsequently spent two years researching and documenting oral histories which also led to me producing the short video documentary, *Wasauksing Women Sharing Strength*.

### **Oral Histories and Collective Knowledge**

Traditional Aboriginal knowledge, including birth knowledge is based within the oral traditions of our ancestors. Much of the oral histories include collectively held traditional knowledge in the form of stories, ceremonies, medicinal knowledge and community practices around birthing. Collectively held knowledge means that the community or group own information communally (Schnarch 2004). The information documented and shared in this chapter, while based on personal experiences of the women who shared it, is also based on traditional knowledge that is community- and collectively-based.

[5] I spent time with three Wasauksing community members, who represent three generations of experience as mothers, and asked them to share their experience and understanding of traditional birth knowledge. To my great honour the following women agreed to participate: Marie Anderson (Elder/great-grandmother), Faith Pegahmagabow (mid-life/grandmother), and Harmony Rice (youth/new-mother). The women shared personal and

traditional stories with me that paint a picture of a highly communal and spiritual society in which pregnancy, childbirth, and the newborn are honoured as central to communication with the spirit world and finding purpose and meaning in life. They described ceremonies and traditional remedies, which prepared and celebrated new life in the community that have not been practiced in two generations. The combined knowledge and experiences of these women tell the story of a community that was forced to take its teachings underground and is now harnessing the strength to unearth and rejuvenate the beauty and power of what was silenced. The following represents a small excerpt of the immense knowledge these women shared with me.

### **Story Sharing**

In stark contrast to Eurocentric views on spirituality and pregnancy, my exploration of traditional birth knowledge revealed that in the Anishinabek worldview, the states surrounding women and pregnancy are considered to be highly sacred and spiritual. Our traditional knowledge demonstrates to us the importance of paying close attention to our spiritual experiences. This is especially true during pregnancy, because these experiences have the capacity to hold vital teachings, which can affect us, our unborn children, and the community on individual, medicinal, political, and spiritual levels.

[7] Each of the women discussed how pregnancy was and continues to be highly valued in the community. Marie Anderson explained that, "a pregnant woman was a very medicinal woman because she's carrying a new life inside her." As well as bringing the gift of new life to the community, a pregnant woman also brings political and spiritual insight that she might not otherwise be tuned into which can benefit her community. As Marie remarked,

If there was a difficult decision coming on the reserve they'd approach this young pregnant woman and they'd ask her for her advice...they'd offer her tobacco. It's not that she ever encountered anything like that, but you know the advice that comes out of her, really helped those people.

All of the women interviewed expressed the value of providing a baby with its Anishnaabe name. For Faith Pegahmagabow, the most important thing is to ensure that that child is welcomed and that it has received its Anishnaabe name:

Our belief is that before conception, that child's spirit sits with the Creator and it's given instructions on what its life is going to be like when it comes here. And it's also told what it will do in its life here on earth and what it's name is going to be.

Faith explained that since a baby at birth cannot talk, it is the responsibility of the mother and father to find out what that child's name is: what name the Creator gave it.

[8] Faith shared how traditional birth knowledge recognizes the vital role of women since women have the capacity to create new life. Faith explained how women and female power are central and integral to our relationships with aspects of the natural world and to Creation itself. She also discussed the responsibilities women hold in these relationships such as “understanding those relationships that we have and asking, ‘how do we make that stronger?’” Faith defined our relationship with the natural world. She explained, “When people don’t know you they say: ‘Who is your Mother? Who is your Father?’” In the Anishinabek tradition, Faith explained that the recognition of this familial relationship extends to “our connections to the Earth and to come to understand her as our Mother, our natural Mother; and then our Grandmother [the moon]. But you know, this is a different relationship than biological: it is a spiritual relationship.” Faith remarked that understanding these spiritual relationships can be difficult, “for a lot of us [because] we don’t have our body and our mind and our spirit in balance.” In order to achieve this understanding, Faith elaborated on the importance of striving for this balance.

[9] Faith shared important teachings about the relationship between women and the natural world. The strongest connections she drew were women’s relationships to the Earth, water, and the moon. Her descriptions of each of these follows below:

**Earth**

We're fashioned after the Earth; she gives life. So we're fashioned after the Earth because we bring that life forward. When we talk about ourselves as life-givers, we're also talking about the Earth, taking care of her so that she has continued life. We need to teach our women how to take care of it.

**Water**

We have a connection to the water too. Understanding how important that water is to us because if we don't have that water, we're not going to survive. So making sure that water is clean, and not just water that's out in the lakes and bays, but also the water that surrounds our babies when we're carrying them for nine months.

**Moon**

Our connection to *Nabageesis* our Grandmother moon, and she comes once a month that's the same when our moon times come, once a month. The moon [also] controls how that water moves.<sup>i</sup> She controls when our babies are born because she determines when that water's going to come so that the baby can be born.

Faith and women in the Native community in general often refer to menstruation as their 'moon time' based on the synchronicity between lunar cycles and their cycles of menstruation.<sup>ii</sup>

### **The Silencing of Wasauksing Traditional Birth Knowledge**

My mother said her grandmother told them when she was very young – she said she remembers sitting under a shaded tree with the grandmother, and she was telling her grandchildren that when their babies are going to be born, it's going to be a White man to hold the baby. And she said it's not going to be good, because right then and there some of that baby's heritage is being pulled away from him, she said. (Marie Anderson)

Unfortunately, the prophecy told by Marie's great-grandmother three generations before it happened materialized. Throughout Turtle Island and in Wasauksing in the last two centuries, processes of colonization have uprooted, silenced, and erased traditional knowledge including birth knowledge (Koennecke 1985; McInnes 1999; Brownlie 1996; 2005). This section presents ways in which traditional birth knowledge was silenced in Wasauksing according to Marie, Faith, and Harmony and explores how this silencing impacted the community and its birth practices. All three women attributed the erasure of birth knowledge and the shift from community



midwifery practice to the current norm of Western medicalized birth practice to the following three forces: the missionaries, Western medicine, and residential schools.

### **The Missionaries, Western Medicine, & Residential Schools**

The influences of Christian Missionaries in Wasauksing are immense (Jenness 1930; Koennecke 1985; McInnes 1999; Brownlie 1996; 2005). The Church also wielded its power to sever traditional teachings through its partnership with the State and the legislated residential school system. The apprehension of children as young as four years old from their families and communities was without a doubt the most direct and effective way to eradicate the transmission of traditional knowledge (Chrisjohn and Young 1997; RCAP, 1996; Titley 1986). Harmony discussed what she believed to be the biggest loss for Wasauksing's residential school survivors, "their connection to their mothers":

That whole separation from mother; that whole separation from learning how to mother and learning what women's role was in our community was totally stripped from so many people. You know I can think of women that I know that were taken away as children, who then came home and didn't have any kind of understanding of what their culture was or what their role was, as a woman in the community.

Faith drew links between the State- and Church-run residential school system, the Indian Agents, and the introduction of Western medicalized birth practices when she shared her views on how birth knowledge was erased:

The medical profession, or maybe it was the Indian Agents that came and they were telling women that they needed to go to the hospital because it was safer to have their babies there. But you know, maybe it was a set up too; it [the hospital] was an easy place to take a baby from. Because it was in that era that babies were being taken, you know children were taken away from their families.

Faith remarked that the Church wielded its influence by telling community members that, "it was better for us; it was safer for us. We were made to feel ashamed of what we had, that we didn't have anything." Faith discussed how the demonizing of traditional knowledge impacted the community and led to the de-valuing of traditional knowledge and practices. In Wasauksing, community members perpetuated the negative attitudes about traditional birth knowledge because, as Faith explained, they left some people in the community "wanting to fit in or being forced to fit into with somebody else's way of life." Consequently, in many cases traditional practices ceased being lived out in the community. As Harmony remarked,

Doctors and hospitals started springing up in the nearby towns next to First Nations communities; it became taboo; it was

shunned. You know if you weren't a doctor then what were you even doing there?

[12] The erasure and loss of traditional knowledges including birth knowledge has left a deep wound in the community. Faith remarked on the loss,

We had so much, so many valuable practices and so many valuable teachings. Christianity took a lot from our families in terms of traditional practices whether it was having babies at home, or [practicing] our ceremonies or our medicines.

Identity on individual and community levels is profoundly connected to community and spirituality (Anderson 1997; McInness 1999; Pegahmagabow 2007). The impacts of the missionaries, Western medicine, and the residential schools have undermined and devalued Anishinabek identity (*Ibid*). Another consequence is mourning the silencing of a rich cultural tradition that includes bountiful territories, strong communities and families, as well as spiritual relationships with each other and the natural world. According to Marie, Faith, and Harmony, children and mothers were often the centre of these relationships and became the most impacted by their breakdown.

[13] The knowledges that Faith, Marie, and Harmony shared with me about birthing are acts of resistance towards the systemic forces of silencing. Their stories and experiences also demonstrate the wealth of knowledge that, although not always practiced or acknowledged, still exists in the community. Traditional birth knowledge in Wasauksing has not been erased. Rather it has been silenced. As the reader will find, some of it will be unearthed in the following pages.

### **Resistance and Reclaiming Birth Knowledge**

I am so proud of the young women, especially the way they strive to walk through traditional ways. Considering that very few people spend the time to talk to people about what happened a long time ago, the traditional ways. The girls do try hard and I really respect them for that. They're really trying hard, young girls too. (Marie Anderson)

All three women expressed their happiness at today's reclamation of birth knowledge in the community and linked this reclamation with the possibility of more positive birth experiences in the community. Faith explained,

Our birth stories should be good. We should feel good about bringing our children into the world, not have somebody building

onto negative feelings [but rather] that we can do it! Women were delivering their babies at home or in the bush for how many years, and we have our own medicines that can help out, as long as everything in the pregnancy is safe, a woman can have her baby at home. So bringing that back to communities with their traditional practices, I think that's such an excellent dream.

[15] Faith explained, "if we can teach our women how to take care of themselves, you know, why it's important to exercise, why it's important to eat good, why it's important to be in a good mind, do good things and treat people good. Not just while you're pregnant but all the time. When we bring these traditional practices back to the community, women feel good about their ability, and their role or their responsibilities as a life-giver and understand what that means." The following section will celebrate the roots of traditional birth knowledge by looking specifically at the midwife and her vital role in the community.

### **Traditional Midwifery**

My mother [Eva Tronche Pegahmagabow] was a midwife. She had special scissors, and she had special needles. I saw my mother boiling those, and she had wooden little pinchers my dad

made for her. She boiled that too. And when she'd handle those things she didn't touch them, everything was used with the pinchers and placed in a clean cloth and wrapped up. (Marie Anderson)

According to Marie the role of the midwife "dated back right to the beginning of time." At one point in the history of Wasauksing, the midwife touched every life in the community, as she was the one who guided women through the most difficult and rewarding work of giving birth.

[17] According to Faith not "every woman in the community was a midwife." Although "older women probably had knowledge or experience, it was a particular few who decided along the way that that's what they were going to do because everybody has a skill." Marie shared that although "a lot of them learned it from their mothers, there were those girls who were very weak, just like another ordinary person, some people can't stand the sight of blood." Marie remarked, "If they were very weak, they were told not to. Yes, they had to be strong. You have to be strong, firm and strong enough to satisfy your patient, so they can trust you." Faith also pointed out that, "[i]t's the women that had those experiences and were able to teach the new moms about what to expect and what to do and what their role is", which meant the midwives were usually grandmothers. Not only was

experience an asset for a midwife as it was for an expecting mom, but as Faith explains, so too was the physiology of an older woman:

It was the grandmothers and the women who were past their moon times who did that work, helping women to bring their children into the world. Because physiologically, when a woman goes into a birth and she's on her moon, she's cleansing her system, she can cause another woman to have excessive bleeding. I think that's why it became a role for a woman who no longer had her moon times because then her physiological changes didn't interfere with those birthing moms. I think our women understood that so they didn't go to those births when they were on their moon time.

[18] Marie described the relationship and responsibility of the midwife to the pregnant women she serviced. A midwife possessed great skill, knowledge and stamina for the hard work required of her practice. All of the women including Faith stressed that "a midwife had a lot of knowledge about medicines especially for women in their child bearing years." Faith pointed out, "We didn't have all problem-free labour and births. Things could still go wrong. But the midwives had knowledge of the medicines, what medicines she'd use for specific issues for example, in a prolonged labour, she had medicines to help that labour progress." Marie shared stories of her mother

and her mother's friends speaking about getting prepared. They would use the sacks from rolled oats, they had emptied and cleaned, to provide a way to organize their supplies for the births. She explained that, "they always shopped ahead of time for flannel. All this stuff was all ready. Everything was packaged up. And their scissors were already boiled in water and weren't even touched." Marie commented on the amount of work and responsibility that midwives had in communities. She indicated that "it was hard work because everything had to be done properly. The cedar had to be gathered, and after that baby is ten days old, then a feast is put on, on behalf of the baby." Midwives were central in the preparations for giving life, in the ceremony of birthing, as well as in the ceremonies of greeting babies and welcoming them into communities. Their work was central in maintaining the life and connections of life within the community.

[19] Marie explained that the relationship between the midwife and the pregnant mother "starts right from almost at the beginning of the pregnancy." In order to maintain a healthy pregnancy, the midwife shares important knowledge with the mother to be, and "watches over this girl and tells her everything she must do." The close attention paid and teachings imparted by the midwives led to easier births and are why, according to Marie, "when childbirth came, they didn't need all of these needles and stuff." The midwives also supported the new mothers and their babies during



the post-partum period. Marie explained that for “ten days she stayed with that girl. Ten days, for that whole time she taught her everything about the baby. Everything that she was taught she handed it down.” The role of midwives as teachers of birth knowledge as well as the ones that maintained relationships in the community was very respected. This is why tobacco was given to them: this protocol was followed to show respect of the midwives and to demonstrate respect for the lives of these women. Over the generations, there were many Anishinabek midwives who were the caretakers of skills and knowledge in their field. They shared their knowledge with other generations of women that included passing on a belief system which holds pregnancy as sacred.

### **Pregnancy is Sacred**

Each of the women discussed how pregnancy was and continues to be highly valued in the community. Marie explained that “a pregnant woman is a very medicinal woman because she’s carrying a new life inside her.” As well as bringing the gift of new life to the community, a pregnant woman also brings new political and spiritual insight from which the community can benefit. Marie remarked, “If there was a difficult decision coming on the reserve they’d approach this young pregnant woman and they’d ask her for her advice...they’d offer her tobacco. It’s not that she ever encountered anything like that, but you know the advice that comes out of her really

helped those people.” Harmony described how respect for pregnant women remains intact in the community today: “I think that [pregnant women] are highly regarded, respected and honoured.” Harmony explained that this is why she made the decision to go “home to have my baby, I totally chose to be [in Wasauksing] to have my child.” Harmony recalled, “When I wasn’t even showing yet, just the fact that word was out there. Everybody came up and talked to me at different points throughout my pregnancy.” She continued, “There was some kind of a connection now bringing us together now that I was pregnant...people I hardly knew or people that didn’t talk to me much before.” Harmony emphasized the importance of community connection during her pregnancy and how, “[i]t really, really meant so much to me.” The relationship between the community and the pregnant woman is important and reciprocal. A pregnant woman can offer a new lens for examining a community problem. In turn, the community lifts and protects the spirit of the woman by demonstrating interest, care, and kindness for her and the life she is carrying. Marie and Faith explained how every member of the community, including the pregnant woman and the father hold specific responsibilities towards ensuring the safe delivery of the baby and care for the new family. These responsibilities extend into the new family’s emotional and spiritual wellbeing and into the transmission of knowledge.

[21] Processes of colonization have uprooted Aboriginal birth knowledges and little Indigenous-led research documenting the historical and cultural perspectives of Aboriginal midwifery and birth knowledges have been produced. The reasons for this silencing have not changed much over the past five hundred years: patriarchal influences which silence women's knowledge in general; a history of male-dominated research and curriculum development; the private world of childbearing; and the normalization of Western birth practices. This gap must be bridged through research and accessible information sharing in order to create a ripple effect and generate interest in reclaiming traditional birth knowledges and practices in Native communities.

[22] Aboriginal birth knowledge not only empowers Aboriginal women, children, and our communities. It also teaches about the potential in humanity to form relationships based on the balance of reciprocity, mutual respect, and sustainability with the natural and spirit world. These cultural knowledges can be promoted by healthcare practitioners such as midwives, and within systems of education. The world today has much to gain from these perspectives and much to lose if they go unheard. This is the very future of our Nations.

## **Contributor's Biographies**

### **Marie Anderson (Grandmother)**

Marie Anderson crossed into the Spirit World in 2010. She was recognized as a community Elder who held vast knowledge including a solid understanding and grasp of the Ojibway language. She dedicated her life to educating and helping young people. Marie graduated from Western University with a Teacher's Degree and then taught in Wasauksing, Toronto, and Shawanaga First Nation. Marie also dedicated her life to raising her family and was a proud Grandmother. Marie's Anishnaabe name was *Minwaabnokwe* and she was a member of the *Attic Dodem* (Caribou Clan). Marie was born on Wasauksing and came into the world with the aid of a midwife.

### **Faith Pegahmagabow (Grandmother)**

Faith's Anishnaabe name is *Miskomoneshikwe* and she is a member of the *Mukwa* Dodem (Bear Clan). Faith is of Oneida and Delaware decent and is a member of Wasauksing First Nation, which she now considers home. Faith has lived and raised her family in Wasauksing for over thirty years. She is the mother of two daughters and a son and a proud grandmother to six grandchildren with another 'on the way' at the time of this research project. According to Faith, the basis of her knowledge is from the Ojibway people although she also has some from the Haudenosaunee or Ongwehongwe

people. Faith is a respected Midewiwin<sup>iii</sup> traditionalist and completed The Aboriginal Midwifery Training Program in Six Nations.

### **Harmony Rice (Mother)**

Harmony is Potawatomi/Ukrainian and Cayuga/Seneca and was raised in the Midewiwin tradition. Her Anishnaabe name is *Nowgiishigokwe* and she is member of the *Migize* Dodem (Eagle Clan). Harmony was raised in Wasauksing by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother and regularly attended Midewiwin ceremonies and powwows along with the United church. When Harmony had her first moon, she completed a year-long berry fast, a traditional Midewiwin rite of passage ceremony. Harmony is a parent and community leader, a multi-media artist, performer and Publisher of SPIRIT Magazine, which closed its doors in 2009.

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<sup>i</sup> Faith is referring to the relationship and power of lunar cycles to impact tidal waters as she also draws a connection between this lunar cycle and when a pregnant woman's membrane ruptures (water breaks) just prior to giving birth.

<sup>ii</sup> In the days before electricity, women's bodies were influenced by the amount of moonlight we saw. Just as sunlight and moonlight affect plants and animals, our hormones were triggered by levels of moonlight. And, all women cycled together. Today, with artificial light everywhere, day and night, our cycles no longer correspond to the moon. (Feminist Women's Health Centre)

<sup>iii</sup> An Anishnaabe religious order. *Midewiwin* – 'the way of the good heart' (McInnes 1999, 38).

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