

HOW to do WALK WITH ME

Step 1 Grounding In Place

When we piloted the activity, each workshop began with a brief orientation outside the event space. One of our volunteers gave them a sense of what would be happening inside—that they would walk together to five different stations, and encouraged them to take care of and be gentle with themselves and with others, as the nature of the topic and experience was potentially sensitive.

Once everyone had gathered in a circle near the first station, members of our team greeted them and acknowledged our presence on the ancestral lands of the Xwsepsum (Esquimalt) and Lekwungen (Songhees) families. We emphasized that acknowledgments like these are not meant for benefit of the First Peoples, as such. We do it for those of us who have come to this land as immigrants—or who are here as the descendants of immigrants and settlers—so that we might pause for a moment and ground ourselves in awareness and appreciation of the continued, ongoing presence of the First Peoples across Turtle Island. During some workshops, a member of the Heron People Circle was present to offer a greeting in the Lekwungen language. On other occasions, we played a recorded welcome from Chief Ron Sam, elected leader of the Songhees First Nation*. Participants were invited to set an intention for the day as a way of becoming present in the experience. Through this welcome and introduction, we hoped to establish a sense that this was a space “within which special rules obtain,” set apart from business-as-usual at the university.

* Although we are all learning how to acknowledge the lands on which we are gathered at the beginning of an event, only certain people have been granted the authority to welcome people to these lands.

The idea for this first station grew out of a discussion in our planning committee about the significance of locating oneself as living and working on the traditional lands of Indigenous peoples. Heron People Circle members’ presence at the event contributed to the awareness that understanding where we are located was not an issue of the past; Xwsepsum and Lekwungen families continue to live and thrive on this land.

At this station, participants were invited to learn more about the Indigenous name of their place of birth or where they currently reside. We brought in various maps of the province of BC, the entire breadth of Canada, and the continent of North America, all of which included Indigenous place names and/or the First Peoples language spoken in each area. We invited

participants to place a symbol (sticker) on the place where they came from, or currently live, and added a space for those born outside of North America. A volunteer equipped with the [Native Land app](#) on their iPad offered to enter the location of a participant's birthplace or current residence and it would show the Indigenous name of that area. Name badges were available for participants to write down the place name(s) that resonated with them. Buttons acknowledging the ancestral lands of RRU were available to take from a basket on the table.

Near the maps, we posted a sign with a message that invited participants to consider what it means to say we are in relationship to the place where we live or work.

Locating yourself

In the Nuu-chah-nulth language, the suffix 'aht' means 'The people of' that place.

Tla-o-qui-aht
Ahousaht
Opitsaht

Woven into the words for the names of their people is the understanding that they are 'of' that place.

**Take a moment to reflect on what it means for you to be
"of the place" where you have chosen to live?**

How does this perspective affect how you choose to live?

To learn more, see *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* by Umeek E. Richard Atleo. (UBC Press, 2004)

(Download the *Locating yourself* sign on the HANDOUTS & SIGNS page)

After about five minutes, our volunteers encouraged everyone to move on to station 2.

Step 2 Connecting with Stories

Activity participants take another step on the path at the second station, where they find on a table an array of photocopies of short excerpts from memoirs, poetry, fiction, historical documents, song lyrics, and testimonies about the impact of colonialism on Indigenous

peoples. A volunteer invites them all to choose a reading with a title that intrigues them, and then join with two or three others to go read it together at station 3 and talk about it.

Our selection of excerpts included:

A series of evocative essays by the late Richard Wagamese from his book of personal memoirs *One Native Life* (2009), and a passage from his novel *Indian Horse* (2012).

Fatty Legs: A True Story (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2010), which tells the story of an Inuit girl and her experiences in a residential school.

A account of the story of Chanie Wenjack (misnamed "Charlie" by his teachers), a 12-year-old First Nations boy who died while trying to escape from the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School to return to his home 400 miles away. The discovery of Chanie Wenjack's frozen body alongside an isolated stretch of railroad tracks in October of 1966 led to the first inquest into the treatment of Indigenous children in Canadian residential schools.

Two expressions of personal epiphanies experienced by Canadian descendants of immigrants that were written for the play, *From the Heart: enter into the journey of reconciliation* (Weigler, et al., 2013). The first was the lyrics to a song by Stephanie Tiede, "Patience of the Seasons" (p. 46), while the second was a passage from the scene "Born Complicit" (p. 75) (both referenced in Weigler, 2015).

"Prayer" a prose poem about an Indigenous woman's relationship to Great Blue Heron, is by the late Beth Brant, a Mohawk writer from the Bay of Quinte.

A reproduction of a 1948 letter from the principal of an Indian Residential school who wrote to parents telling them that permission to have their children spend Christmas at home at their own expense was a privilege and could be easily revoked (O'Grady, 2015)

A passage from the preface to *The Survivors Speak: A Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2015c).

References to assist in finding these excerpts are included in the READINGS section along with an annotated bibliography of suggestions for many other sources of reading materials.

Step 3 Embodying the Stories

When the participants arrive at the third station, they find 3 to 4 chairs arranged in a cluster around a table. On the table are some sheets of blank paper and coloured markers, pens or

crayons used for drawing, "scripting" or making notes. Each station also has two handouts: *Reflecting on the reading*, and *Be Creative!*

The first handout is designed to encourage them to set aside any intellectual analysis, and instead to notice and resister feelings that surface when encountering this material. The handout offers a way into this kind of response by suggesting that when they share their thoughts with one another, they might try using one of the following words as they begin to speak:

- I wonder . . . ; I feel . . . ; I am . . . ; This is . . . ; Standing here . . . ; Amidst the . . . ; I see . . . ;
- I breathe deep and . . . ; Inside my heart . . . ; My mind is . . . ; My body speaks . . . ; I soften . . . ;
- I awaken to . . . ; I begin to move . . .

The second part of the *Reflecting on the reading* handout guides readers away from an inactive stance of pity toward the Indigenous people in these stories or to perceive of them as hopeless or powerless victims. The prompts, presented as a set of two columns, are designed to contain the powerful paradox of those who strive to hold on to their inherently buoyant, strong, and loving spirits while being targeted by extraordinarily racist and dehumanizing oppression. This deceptively simple mix-and-match exercise—drawing a line from one of the feelings in the left column to one of the feelings in the right column—is intended to shine a light on what might not otherwise have been recognized within a story of personal, historic, and social trauma. To support this task they have been given, the participants are invited to identify a single physical action in the story that quintessentially embodies that contradiction*

Now, looking at the passage, find a single physical action in the events described that truly embodies something from the list below:

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| ~ loving while experiencing _____? | humiliation |
| ~ creating or appreciating beauty while experiencing _____? | fear or terror |
| ~ giving care while experiencing _____? | loss |
| ~ holding onto a connection to a person or place while experiencing _____? | isolation |
| ~ finding resilience while experiencing _____? | loneliness |
| ~ achieving victory while experiencing _____? | grief or sadness |
| ~ embodying strength while experiencing _____? | sadness |
| ~ being clever and resourceful while experiencing _____? | bullying |
| | anger |
| | deprivation |

Once you have identified a physical action, turn to the **Be Creative!** Handout

Now that you have identified one or more physical actions that capture the gist of the situation and relationships in the reading, does this remind you of a memory of a moment from your own life? Perhaps it was something from your family's history, or something you once heard about, read, or witnessed as a bystander. In collaboration with your partners, your task is to create a short poem, a brief story, a single performed image, a few lyrics of a song, or a simple movement, that incorporates that very same physical action in the context of your own experience. Borrow the power of that physical action itself (and the reaction it prompted in you) as the central element in your new creative work. Resist the temptation to re-enact the events in the passage you read because these stories are not our stories to tell. Ground it in your own experience. Take ten to fifteen minutes to develop and practice your piece. When everyone is ready, we will reconvene to share with each other what we've created.

Moving into a more performative space can feel like a risk for many people. Borrowing a delightful term from San Francisco-based community choral leader Doug Von Koss, we found it useful to describe the room as a "Perfection-free Zone," explaining to the participants that no one was expecting their presentations would be a polished performance.

It's up to the co-facilitators to monitor the progress of each group. Find the right time to offer clarification for those who are struggling; to coax them away from their sedentary conversations and up on to the floor to try out their ideas for performing their creative responses; to give all the groups some notification (when the time comes) that only a few minutes remain; and, ultimately, to gauge when everyone is ready to move to station 4. In our pilot event, each group embraced the task with enthusiasm, though some showed a little more trepidation than others. With just a bit of encouragement, clarification of the task, and time-keeping announcements from the facilitators, everyone had soon created a short performative response to their readings.

Step 4

Performing Our Empathetic Response to the Stories

Reconvening as a single group, everyone finds a seat, all arranged in a semicircle facing a focal point where the embodied performative pieces will be presented. If you have been working in collaboration with Indigenous partners, they are invited to join the gathering here to share in the witness of the creative work.

Each group takes a turn in front of the others. They might begin by telling their names, but nothing about the piece they read or what it meant to them: they will be showing this to us through the expression of their brief performances. To anchor the significance of sharing these important stories with one another, we chose to hang a paper banner above the performers' playing space. In large letters it reminded us to remember what Thomas King* has said:

Don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.
You've heard it now.

Thomas King

In Thomas King's (2003) book, *The Truth About Stories*, which is the compilation of his talks for the Massey Lecture series, he concludes each essay with this line. His essays can also be heard online: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-2003-cbc-massey-lectures-the-truth-about-stories-a-native-narrative-1.2946870>

After each group's presentation, their audience of other participants and the Indigenous guests reflect on what they heard and saw and felt. The performers then share their own thoughts on the links between the performed piece they had created and the story they had read. When all the presentations had been offered and discussion comes to a close, everyone is invited to move to the fifth and final station, which can be set up near the exit.

Step 5 Closure, Reflections, and Looking Forward

Station 5 serves to close the activity in a good way. A series of flyers, wall posters or handouts on tables offer participants a wealth of practical, specific actions they can adopt to build more respectful, sustainable relationships and friendships with Indigenous people and their communities, and how they can actively support aspirations for social justice. Printable PDFs of the posters can be found in the HANDOUTS and SIGNS section

If there is an option to display books by Indigenous authors at this station, participants, by all means do. After having a taste of some short readings in the *Walk With Me* activity, participants may find themselves hungry to read more and learn more. A stack of index cards and pens on the tables, alongside a message that encourages them to jot down (or photograph) book titles and authors that intrigue them, encourages them to seek out copies to read at their favourite bookstore or library.

If smudging is appropriate within the cultural protocols of your Indigenous partners, perhaps one of them may be willing to offer people the opportunity to engage in a smudging ceremony, as Shirley Alphonse did with our participants, in order to add to the closure of the experience.

As participants prepare to make their way out the exit, you may choose to ask them to fill out a feedback form designed to give them a chance to articulate with relative privacy how the activity was received. By working out the timing for the entire activity, you can schedule the start of each subsequent group to leave the facilitators time for a short break before the next group arrives at the entrance door.