

EMBRACING IDENTITY:

NAVIGATING IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND CELEBRATING MÉTIS HERITAGE

By Kerri Keffer



There is a beautiful little town that lies outside the south of the Perimeter called St. Norbert. It is famous for its farmers' market, the plays that would take place at the Trappist Monastery Ruins and the Red River Floodway (just outside of town). Growing up in this beautiful place, my friends and I would fish along the La Salle River, ride our bikes to LaBarriere Park and pretend to be married at the church down the street from the high school.

What I did not know is that all the places where we chose to visit and hang out were filled with much more meaning, importance, and history than what we were taught.

UNCOVERING LAYERS OF MEANING IN ST. NORBERT'S LANDMARKS

I have stood in the place where my ancestors fought for the rights of the Red River Métis people, I fished near the banks on which Louis Riel evaded capture during the resistance. As a child, I was "married" in front of the church built to commemorate the creation of Manitoba. I walked the streets named after my ancestors (who are one of the founding families of St. Norbert) and other influential Red River Métis citizens. This lack of education and understanding about who I was, and the positive teachings of my culture left me feeling like an imposter. I felt like I did not belong in a place that I called home.

CONFRONTING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Imposter syndrome is a term I know well. In fact, I would say that we were and still can be best friends from time to time.

If I was to define imposter syndrome, I would say it is a feeling - a feeling like you are a stranger to yourself. It's a feeling like you are a fraud and that at any moment someone is going to call you out by asking questions that you cannot answer because you do not know the facts.

The inability to respond with concrete facts would prove that you are an imposter.

I felt proud to say I was German, English and French with roots in Prussia, Belgium, France, Gladstone, St. Boniface, and even Kerry the German settlement in St. Labre, Manitoba.

Every now and then I would take a risk and say that I was Métis. I would gauge the reactions of the listeners as they processed this idea of identity. While they pondered, I felt like an imposter as soon as the words came out of my mouth.

What did that even mean? How will I be treated?

Let me tell you, the stereotypes that perpetuated around this idea of being Indigenous at the time were scary. I did not know if I had enough knowledge to correct or redirect misinformation because I did not know what that misinformation may be.

What I did know is that the words felt empty, they felt like the wind took them and did not allow for others to hear them and for me to feel the power of them.

Sure, I could show them my genealogy or a picture of my dad. I could say that my grandmother would make a mean bannock on special occasions and that I knew how to bead loom, but in the end that would not be enough.

I did not have the historical context back then to defend anything, especially my Red River Métis heritage. A part of this uncertainty came from my paternal side

and hearing stories of family members denying the Métis ancestry and always wondering if we were not Métis, why did my father, my brothers, and I have our Métis citizenship cards? The narrative about being Indigenous was not a positive one growing up. The "reign of terror" and racism can take credit for that one.

EMBRACING MÉTIS IDENTITY

I can now say with pride that I am a proud Red River Métis woman who has attended sweat lodge ceremonies, smudges, carries teachings, can bead and make moccasins and gauntlets.

I can make a ribbon skirt and I am uncovering my history and will continue to learn about my ancestry.

I walk in two worlds. I am Métis. I carry the blood memory of my First Nations ancestors and have lived in the world of my European ones. I find strength in knowing that I can and have been building the bridge between two worldviews that I never even thought would complement each other.

My culture came from two beautiful cultures that found a way to build upon each other's strengths, to grow and adapt in a way that created another culture using the entities of two.

I always felt connected to First Nation teachings that I was introduced to in university. I trust my knowledge and continue to grow. I find peace with the trees and within the animals of the seven teachings. My kids will be the ones who will never know what it is like to not know where you come from. They are proud to be Métis and they are proud to speak about how they are Indigenous, to wear their Métis sashes and have the chance to learn Michif and French.

History and systemic racism tried to take my ancestry away from me. It tried to make me ashamed, and it tried to disguise me.

I have fought back, and I have come to find that there is strength in being a Red River Métis woman. I am of the "found" generation. I have been given the opportunity to witness the eight fire and walk with people who are no longer okay with Indigenous history being ignored or cast to the shadows.

I am bridging the disconnect of culture back to my father and raising my children to know who they are and where all their ancestors came from.

My story is like so many other stories in Manitoba. I do not have to choose which side of my ancestry holds my only teachings. I cherish the way I was brought up and I am now finding that my identity is not so hollow, I am not so lost.

Education helped me start my journey, education helped me discover avenues to search for answers and connections, education allowed me to experience ceremony and teachings that I would have never found until maybe more recently. Education has given me the opportunity to educate others and to help fill in the gaps with my own family. The eighth fire has been lit and with that, education is going to bring back history and shine the light on the hidden curriculum.

THE PATH FOWARD

Last year, I was asked to speak at a Manitoba Rural Learning Consortium (MRLC) session that was focused on the *Mamàhtawisiwin: The Wonder We Are Born With* framework. My best friend, Imposter Syndrome, was right there with me but I did not let it deter me. Rather, I let it remind me of my journey and how far I have come. With that I decided to create a list of sayings that I have used successfully along my journey, ones that I must remind myself of often:

1. Lean into the discomfort.

It is okay to feel uncomfortable, this is how we know that we are learning and that we are human. Let your students know that you may be learning with them. Go on the learning journey with them; be transparent.

2. Walk in a good way/teach with good intent.

If your intentions are that of education, learning, and including perspectives that are not necessarily within the textbook, etc., then you are well on your way. If you make a mistake or speak of some misinformation, correct it and let them know that you are correcting it. When you can, ask for guidance from a coworker, Indigenous Elder or Knowledge Keeper, or start making some phone calls. To walk in a good way is learning from your mistakes.

3. The power of "why".

You will not believe what happens when you ask a person "why". This

creates a conversation and a chance to understand why someone feels the way they do or thinks the way they do. It is always about questioning the content or perspective, not the person (if you say that, the defenses go down almost immediately).

4. You cannot force people to check themselves.

It is difficult to check one's bias and this cannot be forced. Individuals need to go through a grieving process when it comes to ways of their beliefs, way of thinking, and even the stereotypes they have. The world is changing quickly (even if it does not feel that way). People need time to change, to process what they thought to be true and realize that they may not have all the information.

5. Just ask.

This is one that I must remind myself so often about. Just ask, if they say "no", that is okay. If they say "yes", even better.

6. Reconciliation is not a race.

Reconciliation is about relationship building, and as we know, relationships take a lot of work and a lot of time. If your intentions are not about relationship building and simply about checking off the box, then you will probably find out quickly that things may not go as planned and that the journey will become increasingly difficult and frustrating. Take a breath and the time for this work will always be available.

7. Doing nothing is not an option.

This one is self-explanatory. We can do better, and we should be doing better. It does not matter the demographic of your school, or the area in which you teach. Start small, start with something that you know a little about or that a coworker or perhaps friend or family member may know something about. The reality is, preparing our students for the "real" world, is preparing our students with true history and ways of engaging and building relationships that are healthy. ①