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# Dream Knowledge – Understanding the Dreamworld Utilizing the Medicine Wheel

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This article looks at Indigenous dreaming and spirituality, which brings healing, greater resilience, and has the power to heal trauma. Analyzing dreams or ‘dream weaving’ is a conduit with a message that brings about healing and well-being (Lorenz, 2013; Riley-Mukavetz, 2021). To understand Indigenous dream culture, the Medicine Wheel is an essential tool for guiding one’s development – a methodology for understanding humanity and obtaining holistic guidance. There are many ways to use it, as it is a paradigm method used when teaching circle pedagogy. This sacred circle (Couture, 2011) provides a balance in spiritual and health connections that gives all members a chance to explain and debate, prior to determining a cause of action. Many ways exist of interpreting dreams, but it also necessary to focus on the wisdom and knowledge of Elders and others as guides, who are familiar with Indigenous spiritual perspectives. This article thus includes an evaluation of dreams, dream knowledge and a study of the use of the Medicine Wheel, along with spirituality. This dream knowledge presented reflects my own lived experience as an educator of settler-Indigenous background, as I use dreams to interpret my own spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental well-being.

Goulet (1993) notes that “the empirical and logical rationality that defines knowledge as knowledge of fact’ is a rationality that is not hospitable to ‘the insights of art, religion, fantasy, or dream” (p. 174). Dreams are a powerful tool that have been used within Indigenous research capacity to understand complex areas that incorporate the spirit world, the subconscious sphere, and harmony energy that can accumulate and provide clarity when needed, especially, in uncertain times. Indigenous dream knowledge is discovering the understanding of questions asked, after sorting them out within the dream world, but they also provide a level of clarity when connected to the spirit world, sometimes referred to as the 5<sup>th</sup> dimension (Elder Monique Renaud of Kitchisibi, personal communication, July 1, 2020). In fact, gaining knowledge from dreams is such a powerful method that in the early 40’s, psychologist, Carl Jung, was led to develop such a method for interpreting one’s dreams and saw it as a spiritual journey to the soul. He did a great deal of research using dreams and visions. This opened the door to millions of psychoanalysts and followers around the world, who now use this age-old method of gleaning knowledge from their dreams.

The way that we, as Indigenous peoples, are able to connect with a wide range of spirit areas such as the dream world - also known as ‘dream time’, gives us a unique link to ways of accessing knowledge, thinking of solutions to a difficult topic, and or understanding other people as well as who we are. It is a powerful tool along that pathway (Pritchard, 2005). This age-old application of gathering knowledge is as vibrant and solid as any method today. It is often referred to as a gift, a vision or hearing knowledge/advice/call of one’s ancestors in the form of teachings that are bound as sacred in origin (Ermine, 1995). Mudrooroo (1995) defines dreams as “‘The Dreaming’ or ‘the Dreamtime’ [which] indicates a psychic state, in which or during which contact is made with the ancestral spirits, or the Law, or that special period of the beginning” (p. 41).

Marsden (2004) implies a need to “validate dreaming as a research tool” (p. 54) so suggests that dreams “Answer our questions, guide our actions, or make sense of the world [it is the] development of a research model that is meaningful, relevant, and useful for doing research as an Indigenous researcher and with Indigenous people” (p. 54). Dreams can be understood as either a way of processing knowledge that requires additional pondering or a means of resolving uncertainties or disagreements. One can also gain meaning by interpreting the knowledge that derives from an assortment of intersectionalities, past experiences, and a desire for knowledge. A similar understanding would be obtained from blood/ancestral knowledge that provides insight into areas/realms that might not have previously been accessible to an individual, such as by walking in the bush, feeling at ease with oneself and knowing you have already been through that area or on a certain path similar to a ‘deja vu’.

Dreams have been used as a method for conducting Indigenous research and providing a conduit to access knowledge that might not have been obtained by other conventional ways. Studying one’s dreams is a method that is thus recognized as a worthy Indigenous approach to gathering knowledge, based on culture, and supported by traditional teachings and the wisdom of Elders (Hart, 2010). Indigenous peoples have the capability of accessing their inner space and connecting with spiritual areas that are unseen and grasping this hidden knowledge (Ermine, 1995), which is similar to accessing oral history (Rigney, 1999).

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers have commented on the necessity of studying one’s dreams and the benefits derived from them. Absolon (2011) shares her insight regarding dreams and their significance as a way of shaping Indigenous research and providing guidance on a spiritual quest for answers, which may also be referred to as a vision quest. Dreams inspired Absolon (2011) to follow the advice of holistic knowledge as a traditional route to learning so she left a laptop near her bed to record her dreams (personal commentary, June 17, 2017) so that she could think “about

her dreams and honour them” (p. 34). She states how one “dream was so vivid that ‘as soon as I awoke, I drew out the petal flower and identified its components in relation to Indigenous methodologies” (Absolon, 2011, p. 48). Martin-Hill (2008) also concedes that “dreams, visions, and prophecies can direct and inform Indigenous people in their everyday consciousness.

Experiencing a prophecy within a dream has been reported throughout human history and there have also been accounts of prophecies in various spiritual encounters. Connecting between the dream world and reality is strong among Indigenous peoples; as different nations or tribes can access both worlds as a way to facilitate dialogue, understand situations or resolve disputes. Conducting religious ceremonies also can be a link for accessing the dream world. Metzner (2005) shared that Mexican clergy believed that these rituals were, in fact, a gateway to the devil, who was controlling the user. However, the local Aztec people used special ‘magic’ mushrooms to leave the real world and enter the dream world, where a higher spiritual connection was achieved. These mushrooms were believed to be the work of the Creator – holy mushrooms that were in use prior to European invasion. However, “much of the information about Indigenous healing and the experiences surrounding the healers are not documented and never will be” (DeBoer, 2022, p. 3). We need to understand how the dream world is used as a conduit for healing as an alternate holistic method that can provide insight and guidance when there is a lack of knowledge and direction in times of great need and confusion.

More than that, “‘knowing’ empowers the Indigenous consciousness” (p. 76). Ruffo and Macfarlane (2016) declare that “(it is) through dreams that the gifted in our Aboriginal communities ‘create’ experience for the benefit of the community through the capacity inherent in *mamahtowisowin*” (p. 108) (the Cree word for life force) (p. 104). This is “a capacity to tap the creative life forces of the inner space by the use of all the faculties that constitute our being –to exercise inwardness” (Ermine, 1995, p. 104). In *Omàmiwininimowin* (Algonquin), the word for life is *pimàdiziwin*, which is a concept, ideal, or the way that the knowledge was summoned either by a dream, vision quest, by praying, meditating or in ceremony, while the inspiration becomes present. What matters is the method of delivery and the state of knowing, and being able to move around without any distractions (Debassige, 2010).

Dreams are understood as a way of connecting in a deeper sense with a spiritual direction that can serve to help Indigenous peoples. Boulette et al. (2022) reveals that “Spiritual experience is equated with knowledge that is manifested through ceremony, vision quests, and dreams. Therefore, knowledge is sacred and seeking knowledge is a spiritual quest” (p. 51).

Casale (2020) says that “many Indigenous societies in North and South America have dream theories and interpretations that reveal a philosophical order about the nature of the universe” (Online). Other dream knowledge is referred to as ‘mind space’ and is a method that Elders utilize when organizing their thoughts and conducting knowledge sharing sessions. Rheault (1999) shares that dreams are a way of teaching and providing guidance along a difficult path to navigating the subconscious by a self-reflection approach.

Kovach (2009) explains the interconnection of how dream knowledge is placed within Indigenous research methodology as the Elders’ conduit to data collecting. This path of oral dreams provides a way of understanding a methodology that is not difficult for non-Indigenous people to comprehend. She questions “how do Indigenous researchers approach the cultural aspects of Indigenous knowledge when making methodological choices?” The Elders say, “We talk about dream knowledge.” (p. 70).

The infusion of dream knowledge provides a look into how dreams effect people and act to move beyond the roles of research. It is a feasible method of understanding traditional knowledge and how it is transferred, gathered, and used in decision processes by Elders and community members.

## **The Medicine Wheel and Healing – A Guide to Understanding Dreams**

Duran (2012) explains that “Dreams for Native people are alive, and possess consciousness/awareness; the dream knows the dreamer” (p. 17). This connection enables the dreamer to connect with their dream and, therefore, weave their dreams through the interconnections of what has been revealed – the Medicine Wheel can be one of those tools. Ringland (2019) explains that the Medicine Wheel is an essential way of guiding a person’s development – a sort of methodology to understanding humanity. This can be drawn out on paper, in meditation or walked out as a personal spiritual journey. This is an ability to apply a method that allows for the identification of a weakness within one of the four elements or colors and enables the seeker/learner to apply themselves to these areas, so that they can confront their mental illness or what ails them (hurts them) all within a holistic approach (Elder Robert St-Georges, personal communication, July 1, 2020).

One can also use the medicine wheel when understanding dreams as it might reveal underlining circumstances. The purpose of a medicine wheel (as depicted below) is to use it as a tool for well-being. There are four parts: physical (black), mental (white), emotional (yellow), and spiritual (red), which are understood as filters when understanding how we interact with daily activities and the dream world.

By using the medicine wheel can navigating the dreamworld become a tool and this is conducted with each part of the wheel. If someone has a bad dream or there is a underlying message such as seeing an image from our past, the medicine wheel can help in developing those images, feelings or thoughts by each part: physical, how does my dream make me feel, are you strong or weak, feeling lost or traumatized by a bast event such as reliving a school experience; mental can be viewed as how we feel in the dream world, do we struggle at a job, learning at a lower rate or even encountering pass challenges such as public speaking or stuttering; emotional can be the representation of how these dream experience make me feel as an adult or child, such as PTSD or intergenerational trauma; and spiritual as the manifestation of your inner self as a way of deeper connection with your spirit as a conduit within the dream world that can enable a direct spiritual connection to occur such as flight high like a bird, walking in the bush and feeling connected on multiply levels or communicating to animals as if this was a natural approach. The medicine wheel can be that conduit by connecting on a deeper level but also as a useful tool in seeing and understanding ourselves as a guide to self-evaluation.



Figure 1. Image of Medicine Wheel – by John T. Ward, October 17, 2022

This process of teaching known as holistic pedagogy uses one’s surroundings, nature, and all living spirits (Absolon, 2011). The medicine wheel is a paradigm method that can be used when teaching circle pedagogy, as it is the sacred circle (Couture, 2011). A circle allows for all participants to share their thoughts, knowledge or concerns regarding how ‘dreams influence us’ as a theme to review, by one person sharing at a time until everyone has shared. This reveals a consensus of accumulated knowledge. The circle provides a

balance in every way – spiritual and health connections that give all members a chance to explain and debate a situation, prior to determining a cause of action (Absolon, 2019). Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy (2014) illustrated how sharing circles provide the space to understand how dreams can be told, what knowledge can be learned, and how dreams can influence our discussion in times of deliberation. (See image below for sharing circle).



Figure 2. Medicine Wheel – Teachings – by John T. Ward, November 19, 2022

Implementing the concept and the knowledge of the medicine wheel is based on the spiritual being of many Indigenous communities, and is shared through its people across Turtle Island (Canada to Mexico) (see image below); whereas other teachings include Panama as being the tail end.



Figure 3. Image of Turtle Island – by John T. Ward, November 21, 2022

This approach to Indigenous wellness reveals “the interconnectedness and balance of the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of health. These four realms also represent the Four Directions, which signify the relationships of health, place, belonging, the natural world, and the balance that exists between all things” (Panofsky, 2020, p. 20). These four human characteristics are applied to understand the four elements or ways regarding how someone feels if their life force is unbalanced. Healing from an Indigenous standpoint allows for the ability of those involved to connect on a deeper spiritual level (Duran et al., 2008). Ringland (2019) expresses that the medicine wheel provides the ability to understand the consciousness of deficit (western) or trauma (Indigenous). One engages with the Medicine Wheel in ways to reclaim who we were prior to the trauma by moving forward so we can reclaim our past as well so it can no longer victimize us.

Following these elements, one unveils one’s own mental journey and uncovers the way to “chaotic, pre-conscious and unconscious mental and biological processes such as images, sensations, kinesthetics, and dream-like states of consciousness” (Ringland, 2019, p. 5), which helps to build self-awareness. These can provide a holistic way of cleansing through a deeper understanding of oneself, which is the beginning of healing. Duran (2012) reveals that she gathers the knowledge of dreams from her patients, then connects with an Indigenous Elder from a community, who can provide a deeper insight into the complexity of the dreamworld and provide guidance within the medicine wheel. Métis Elder Robert St-Georges from Kitchisibi teaches about the

medicine wheel, but reveals that a participant can navigate with a guide on the four directions as seen in the above image, however, if turned horizontally, it can reveal a deeper methodology with teachings up to 34 circles.



Figure 4. 34 Circles of a Medicine Wheel – by John T. Ward, February 13, 2023

The passing of each circle enables a deeper understanding and realization of how the participant is struggling within the four directions, but also how these circles can manifest into the dream world if left unresolved. There are other methods and ways of accessing the dreamworld, but understanding the message is essential. Of course, having a guide is essential, whether an Elder or someone in another compacity, to provide the necessary steps such as advice, and knowledge and interpret what has been revealed and what is still in the unknown – the void requires conducting ceremonies, attending sweats, healing lodges, drumming, being in the bush or in a safe place that provides clarity to what is being sought out. All leads to a new resilience in the participant and healing from traumas.

## **Conclusion**

### **Fusion of Traditional Knowledge with the Medicine Wheel – a path towards Healing**

By including this traditional method of understanding oneself, the medicine wheel as a guide can align the body, mind, spirit, and emotions to best combat against mental illness, which effects so many. This fusion cannot only prevent trauma and anxiety, but it can enable a self-help to occur from a holistic non-medicated perspective that has been used in a multitude of ways dating back to the worlds of our ancestors. We, as Indigenous peoples, must utilize our own educational learning systems so that we do not have to rely entirely on the predominantly settler-colonial standpoints, which have been used to control, limit, and segregate the world's Indigenous peoples. By rising up and including traditional knowledge and belief systems, we will not only honour our ancestors, but all those who came before us and inspire those who will follow our wisdom and guidance as the next generation walks in our footsteps. We must do this for them as our voices will be their guides and allow them to walk their own paths toward understanding the dream world. It is only through a reconciliation of self as a way of healing that we

can become resilient and make our knowledge systems relevant as practical method towards healing – one that can also inspire those who would once have excluded us from participating – the settlers.

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