**Transcript of Thrivival: The Fire Within  
15. Thrivival: Balance   
Project Lead and Speaker: Heather Simpson**

HEATHER SIMPSON:

In introducing our next component, we ask, what does balance mean? From a Western perspective in education, it might mean reading, writing, and arithmetic, all mental exercises. From an Indigenous perspective, this theme encompasses a holistic view, recognizing that balance is found when all aspects are brought into harmony. Indigenization is a philosophy and practice that strives for greater balance in education, embracing and lifting up Indigenous ways to move beyond Eurocentric ways and tradition. This is an incomplete picture as it still leaves out representation that is neither Indigenous nor Westernized. For a fulsome representation of balance, we can look to The Sacred Circle Teachings or Medicine Wheel Teachings, as it's often referred to by its Anglo-Saxon name. Aspects of these Teachings represent humanity as made up of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of self. While other Teachings emphasize the inter-relatedness, interconnectivity, and holism that is natural to the Circle. As Teachings, it is told that we are not whole without all and what is not whole is imbalanced as all parts need each other.

Similarly, the concept and prayer of All Our Relations emphasizes respect and honour for the balance of life. Indigenous Nations have their own set of laws and ethics that govern social and environmental responsibility. However, one commonality between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit worldviews is a shared belief that all living and nonliving have a place insignificance in the universe. In other words, we're all related and everything is connected.

For the participants of this project, the conceptualization of balance from an Indigenous perspective was a main focal point for one of the participants and the telling of their story. They often share a series of graphic representations of different sacred circle concepts with the intention of using the symbolism and interpretations of the symbolism to inform and guide their responses to each research question and their recommendations for improving educational opportunity for all learners. The other participant explored the concept of balance in a way that spoke to the individuality and unique career path of learners in post-secondary, advocating that not all disciplines should be treated the same in program requirements.

Both participants expressed concern about the imbalance of course load for Indigenous Autistic learners, both requiring a reduction of course load to the 40% threshold acceptable for qualifying for Student Aid BC as a full-time student as their only strategy to manage academic demands and rigor. It was the shared experience that participants were unable to satisfy the demands of mandatory coursework at a higher course load. For one participant, this meant failing the same writing course twice, explaining that for them, mandatory courses outside their mathematics and computing strength areas "require twice as much effort to get half as many returns." For the other, it meant being on academic probation and their first semester of postsecondary and passing all courses with minimum grades required. From these experiences, both participants changed their approach to coursework to register for a maximum of two courses per semester so that they could continue enrollment as full-time students. This, however, does not provide the equitable experience of graduating on time with a peer cohort.

In exploring balance, one participant raise a concern related to Institute's responsiveness to Truth and Reconciliation and the Calls to Action and other mandates as established in the advancement of Indigenous rights. When asked about their thoughts on coursework that teaches about the history of Canada, the history of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous rights and justice issues, for example, the participant was clear that this training should not be universal in post-secondary, but dependent on the career path of the student. They expressed, "I do think that from my experience as a programmer and experience as a student in general, more instructional material to address discrimination could be done and should be done. Like, especially in say, health care or policing. But it should be done in fields where like the neglect of such things is going to have a very real and dire consequences. However, students should be, shouldn't be expected to take this course. Like say something, something... What's the word? People oriented, I guess? Or something like the ability for someone like absolutely to destroy someone else's life isn't really that much of a possibility." They build upon this by adding, "I am aware however, that including more instructional materials should take into context the problems that such material should address. The information that a student can take in at once is not infinite. And some students specifically enter a program in an effort to specialize in something that they feel confident in doing. That factor counterbalances the benefits of such instructional material and their ability to counter externalities."

Instead of a universal mandatory course of this nature, this participant says, "I think that in terms of prejudice and discrimination, that is something that definitely needs to be giving them more attention in high school" and goes on to say, "I also believe that if you need post-secondary education to become a more reasonable voter, that's not indicative of the success of post-secondary, but a failure in the education system and instilling that information before voters reached the age of majority."

The idea that balance is achieved by the sharing of roles and responsibilities was the message expressed as well by the other participant in their digital story titled "My Medicine Wheel." Seven graphics were selected, each depicting different applications of Medicine Wheel Teachings with all supporting a fundamental message that Thrivival is dependent on interdependence. For this participant, achieving balance in post-secondary education expands beyond the brick-and-mortar and studies and requires care and attention to all the essentials that make attending school and thriving in it possible for mature learners. Things like employment, income, housing, public safety, community engagement, and access to quality care. The participant acknowledged these essentials as medicines needing to be balanced to achieve wellness as a learner. The participant's story continued exploring balance through Wheels that depicted the Teachings of all our relations to ground us in a knowing that, in their words, "we all come from the center, which is the Creator" and "the birds, the animals, they're all part of Mother Earth, and for me that is important."

The participant's story too symbolized the balance of roles that they play: Visionary, Healer, Teacher and Warrior; and the values that would support realization of their success in these roles: Truth, Love, Wisdom, and Courage. To answer our research questions, the participant reflected that we need to look at ourselves, saying that this Wheel are "really the important things to keep the balance in to things." For the participant, living out this character and roles is supported by balancing a life filled with practices and traditions that nurture this way of being. The participant told this part of the story using an application of the Medicine Wheel for aspiring to mental wellness from a holistic perspective. Sharing personal practices like exercising, sleeping, eating well, along with practicing forgiveness, spending time in nature, attending an African church, and practicing self-reflection. The participant shared, "I reflected a lot on myself in this research program. I'm able to recognize my weaknesses, strengths, barriers and obstacles I can overcome in the next term, when I started in September."

This participant's story expands the concept of balance beyond oneself. It encompassed a recognition that if Mother Earth is not balanced, everyone suffers. They said "the reason why I chose that one graphic is because there's four seasons, which is supposed to keep the world balanced. But right now with how things are, the world is really unbalanced because we took advantage of Mother Earth and we should not take things for granted because life is a gift." Selecting an image for story that represents aspects of the Four Directions, such as the seasons of nature and humanity and animals and their Teachings associated to cardinal directions, the participants said, "for me it's important to keep these things, these Teachings in balance. Without that balance things are the way they are right now."

Finding a pathway to balance is according to our participant's story an interplay between two internal and external worlds, with Mother Earth and creation as the connector. The final two graphics representing the participant's urging of practices for achieving balance represents these realms. One graphics selected depicts a Wheel for meditation to ground, to Mother Earth, and the other a Wheel representing four races of humanity and their responsibilities to natural elements. To close their story the participant shares, "I'm like an explorer like Star Trek, and there are a lot of cultures and religions out there. I respect everyone's culture, religion. I don't discriminate people and stuff. You know, there's more than four Nations, but for Indigenous People it's about the land. And I guess for some other people, it's air or water depending on where you're living. Or fire. I know some African people because I go to the church. It's all about fire as well. And just with the Nations and different earth elements, it's important to keep in balance again, we all come from the center, which is the Creator."