**Transcript of Thrivival: The Fire Within
16. Thrivival: Community
Project Lead and Speaker: Heather Simpson**

HEATHER SIMPSON:

Thrivival: Community.

This aspect of their story segues into the last component of Thrivival, Community, but to conclude, an exploration of balance, Elder Phillip offers important considerations for both within the post-secondary landscape and as citizens on Indigenous land. As Indigenous Peoples our histories, ways and stories have been whitewashed, buried, erased. Indigenization and decolonization in post-secondary will only be possible by balancing Truth and Reconciliation. There can be no relationship if we cannot have an honest relationship with ourselves.

Elder Phil teaches us "of our history, the history of Canada itself, whether it's Indigenous or not, we all need to look at that picture and see how we can make a change here? How can we make it better going forward with the kind of destruction that happened here in our history? It's going to take time and it's going to need to go into the education system. And you're going to go through struggles. Because it's been this way for a long, long time since the beginning of the decolonization here in Canada. What does that mean? For me, it means for me to be able to try and work things out. Coming from both sides, the Western worldview and Indigenous worldviews. And a lot of times I call it the natural world view. We need to understand we're here for a reason and everybody is here for a reason. Until we understand the natural side of our life balance, it is going to be hard for us to move forward because we tend to mess things up as human beings. We need to look back and acknowledge what gives us life, what gave us that? What do we need to keep healthy for us to keep going? The Earth is what we need. An Indigenous worldview comes from the Earth. And everything that comes from the natural world is what an Indigenous worldview is. It's hard for Western worldview to see that because 90% of the people of the world come from a perspective of the science worldview. Mind your science. We need science, but we can't forget the natural world view. We've got to balance that and we're not doing it today. That's why we're in a big mess today. Not only with our health, but what's going on throughout the world. Look at the wars going on. Something is not balanced here. So we need to come together to make that balance. It's going to be hard for the people that believe in all the scientific side of life."

We need to come together and community is an essential component of Indigenous Autistic Thrivival. This was the wisdom shared by Elder Phil and our two participants. The fire within is strengthened and sustained in relationship and connection with our People, our Ancestors, our Cosmology, Nature, and the Creator. For Indigenous Peoples, it is in the blood memory we carry that tells us that though we might feel alone, we are not. We are still here. We have always been here and we always will. As a group cast to the margins in education and in society because we were born into the "other," many Indigenous and Autistic Peoples struggle to feel a sense of safety, security, and belonging. I've heard many stories from relatives that out of fear, they could not acknowledge their cultural heritage as Indigenous. The same is true for my relatives that are neurodivergent. Prevalent racism and discrimination in Western society have made it unsafe to do so. Social isolation has made further complex by the degrees of cultural and familial separation that has happened because of colonization and impacts of assimilation policy on Indigenous Peoples, and for Autistic Peoples, the challenges associated to autism identification. While this is not everyone's experience, it is the experience of many, including myself.

It was with this understanding that this project's main priority was holding a safer space for all our members, especially our participants. Elder Phil explained early on to our participants that community-building starts with and is maintained with safety. As Elder Phil often says, "safety is number one." Our protocols, values and practices are followed for a reason, and the foundation is safety and respect. Before the study began, Elder Phil shared his perspective on what it means to hold a safer space together as we journey forward in the project. In a later session, he added to his Teachings, acknowledging that learning and participating is only made possible when a person feel safe. Sharing from his history and experiences, Elder Phil says, "you need to be in a safe place to do that, express self and participate, where people are respecting you and where people are taking new knowledge that was never told in the education system. So sometimes it's hard for people that don't understand that concept not having those life experiences. They tend to go to the head all the time. All of us do that. We always forget our emotions, our spirit, who we are. We shut it off and that's what happened to us too. Our whole history, colonization, everything was shut off. We need to try and fit into certain box to be accepted and to be able to be a part of the society. Obviously, it hasn't worked for the last 500 years. And we're at a time now, it's okay to identify who you are and feel good about who you are."

Holding safer space was essential to community-building in this project and provided the environment where we can hold each other up during difficult conversations and be honest, sharing intimate details and Truths of lived experiences. Everyone who participated in this project understood this as a shared responsibility, all contributed to creating a safer environment. This was achieved through participant-to- participant support, Elder support, my facilitation practice and the practice of traditions like introduction protocol, sharing circles and consensus governance. Decolonizing our research processes was an important, was as important as the results we were working towards.

Establishing a safer environment for this study inspired ethical citizenship in practice. Participants demonstrated great respect, care, and concern for each other, making comments like, "You're welcome. And this is a judgment free zone. And that's a safe place for anyone to share anything, and it's safe in that circle. But I thank you for acknowledging that or thank you. Oh, good. You're doing great. I just wanted to give you some acknowledgment of the courage and bravery it took to share with what was said. And so I just wanted to thank you for sharing that."

Encouragement of active citizenship and inclusion occurred throughout the sessions and was upheld and promoted by our Elder. He emphasized to the participants the importance of telling their stories, their Truths, in an honest way to know the value of their knowledge and experiences. Elder Phil said, "I want to thank you both for sharing. That is very honest. It's coming from a good place. You didn't read it in a book, you experienced it. That's very genuine and that's what it's going to take for this circle. To be strong when we are honest, brings things forward. And then we can make changes when we start to hear those things. All of us working together somehow somewhere. You're going to help other people. Like I said, you guys are the teachers, we're all teachers. Nobody, like Heather said, nobody is higher than anybody else in the circle. We are all equal here to have a space, to be able to say how you feel, how we think, and how we see things. So we're going to learn some of that as we move forward. And you know, this is like the beginning. It's good. I hear it, it makes me feel good because I've seen these things, these issues for many, many years in my lifetime. It's happening, It's changing. It's changing in the school system, changing in our whole society. And that's why we're here talking about it. Something is making a change and we're here doing it. We're just tiny particles of it. So again, I want to share that with you guys that I just want to say don't give up because you're making steps forward right now by just introducing yourself who you are and wanting to make a change. And there's going to be other people that are going to come behind us."

Sharing stories and experiences was another significant aspect of building community in our study. When one participant shared their story, it invited the other to reflect on their experience and share, building from each other and contributing to a feeling of shared storied experience. For example, one participant observed "seems like mental health is something that's shared by us."

Stories are a powerful medium for conveying knowledge and understanding as we know well through oral traditions of Indigenous Peoples over millennia across the globe. Stories are also essential to forging strong community, transmitting culture, instilling ethics, values, and influencing actions.

In helping prepare the participants to create personalized and meaningful digital stories, Dr. Johannes shared "so many complexities to so many stories and I find that really interesting. Indigenous students certainly have stories and are the tradition in education. This one student was telling me that his mother-in-law was she thought there were gaps in his education. So what she did was she invited him to come and learn how to harvest fish, to can fish. And then he went and he spent like all week and there they were counting salmon. And he said at the end of the week he had a whole sense of the history and the origins of a myths and also matriarchy. He was marrying into a matriarchal family. And so he had a whole different worldviews than he had at the beginning of the week. So he was theoretically there to learn how to can fish, but in reality, he was there to hear stories which are now deep in his heart."

For the participants of this study, improving education and educational experiences require much more than improvements to the transactional nature of knowledge consumption and representation. From an Indigenous perspective, education is not individualized, but a collective responsibility and making positive changes requires us to be community-minded and mind those in our community. The stories told by participants carry guidance on how to create a community within educational settings for which Indigenous Autistic learners are safe, respected, and cared for. They also think of community beyond the institute and hold expectations that supporting individuals, whether they are adult learners, are not just the role and responsibility of their institute, but as the societies that they are members from the macro concept of community and specifically addressing the issue of internalized oppression. One participant asserts, "in general, I think the logic would track that people are disadvantaged due to cultural or economic reasons wouldn't feel that much confidence in trying to, like... they wouldn't feel very motivated to get into postsecondary because they already feel worthless already. So what's the point of even trying and something that looks difficult? It's probably going to be hell. And from an economic perspective, the consequences of that are bad, you know? So like this is something that needs to be done in the long term and needs to be addressed. And it requires more than what post-secondary institutions could provide like honestly, if we're talking about now, say First Nations communities. There's something that Elders need to like, well, like you know, in common, well, not just Elders, but let's say adults in general should try to inspire their kids and the next generations to try and feel like they can do things that seem difficult."

On a micro level, community development within the postsecondary and teaching and learning environments requires taking into account the different sensory needs of class members. One participant's story expressed the barriers that they encounter that disrupt their learning capabilities, e.g. when there's cross talking from other students in the classroom that is not relevant to the teachings or has overtaken the instructor while speaking. Over the course of their semester, they reflected on their learning preferences and advocated with instructors for alternative opportunities for tests and assessments. In one case, the participant tells, an instructor allowed the participant to visually represent their ideas and it resulted in an improved grade for the participant than the previously failed assignment.

Building communities with Indigenous Autistic learners goes beyond their active citizenship in teaching and learning environments. It goes beyond the individual learner in question and it calls all into the circle. This includes those yet not present and those whose voices are not included. Many Indigenous cultures share a future-facing perspective and ethic that governs what is good for the collective must be good for future generations. One of my Elders, Elder Ken Pruden from the Métis Nation has taught me, we do not borrow the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow the Earth from our children.

This Teaching is the ethic that has inspired modifying our research framework to include exploration of participant insights of Collective Good and Critical Hope. The legacies that our participants desire to leave behind for those that come behind them are to remind that "students, the learners are the teachers" and the stories told contribute to "making the world better for everyone" and for Indigenous Autistic Peoples, to instill "a belief we can be who we are. We can connect to our spirit and ourselves to learn in a safe place, being in the circle." For the participants, they were motivated to be involved with this study and use their storied experiences to help make things better. Recognizing their trauma, grief, struggles, and Thrivival can be a stepping stone for one and for many. In critical hope, they know their stories can inform change because they provide insight and context about "the problems that are faced by not just Indigenous People, but also neuro- divergent people." They have bestowed a great gift to us now, enter those in the future. We have a responsibility in what we do with the knowledge we now carry.