

# Introduction

*Susan Strega and Sohki Aski Esquao [Jeannine Carrière]*

We are both grateful to be visitors here on the lands of the Esquimalt, LeKwunget and Songhees peoples. We have been allowed to live, work and play here, and we recognize how deeply blessed we are.

## **The Bridge**

The Norwood Bridge crosses the Assiniboine River just west of its confluence with the Red River in Winnipeg. The meeting of the rivers marks a traditional and sacred meeting place for Manitoba Indigenous peoples. The bridge marks a division between two realities: to the north lies Main Street, the epicenter of Winnipeg's poverty, violence and despair. To the south, Marion Street is a gateway to working-class neighbourhoods and new middle-class suburban developments. As young women at various times we both lived under that bridge, because it provided shelter and protection when social workers could or would not. Although we didn't know each other back then we shared a connection, as we were both affected by child welfare through foster care and adoption. We shared the experience of wondering which side of the bridge we might end up on — or whether it was even worth continuing. After long and separate journeys, we met in the hallways of the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. We had survived, and how amazing that we had both become social workers and then teachers of social workers! Our belief is that somehow our ancestors invited us to walk this path together, and it is out of those separate but shared journeys that we came to work together.

We share a sisterhood and a story of resistance and survival that in many ways represents the genesis of this book (and we tell a little of our stories later). We developed this book because we want to make a difference for the young people of today who still sit under that bridge or other places of temporary shelter, looking out and wondering, "Is there any hope for me?" We want to make a difference for the families and communities they have been torn from, saved from or estranged from. We believe there is hope, and we invited our like-minded friends and colleagues to share their hopes for transforming child welfare practice.

## **What This Book Is and Who It Is For**

This is a collection of original pieces by writers and practitioners from diverse locations who share a belief that anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice is both

necessary and possible in child welfare. All of them are fundamentally committed to the notion that we can best help those with whom we work when we are willing to work together across difference — when we can walk the path together. The writers in this book share information about strategies and concrete skills that may help in this journey. They offer students and practitioners alike the opportunity to explore a range of ideas and personal visions that can create positive possibilities for children, their families and communities. As editors we are honoured to present these voices. Across their diversity every contributor shares a passionate commitment to the transformation of child welfare through socially just practices.

Walking this path together is the theme, intention and foundation of this book. Most social work students enter their studies and most social workers enter the field because they are interested in working together with people facing challenges. Over the course of social work education a great deal is taught about why working together is necessary not only to assist clients with making changes they desire but to address the context of domination and subordination that shapes their lives and struggles. Students learn that anti-racist and anti-oppressive strategies are essential to bring about the reduction and elimination of structural inequalities and the racism, colonialism, misogyny, ableism and other justifying belief systems that lie at their root. Yet most students can recount a story of entering their practicum placement or first job and being told, “Forget all that useless stuff you learned in school — now we are going to teach you how to practice in the ‘real world.’” Inevitably that “real world” perspective involves individualizing and pathologizing practices and perspectives that separate workers and clients into two separate and distinct groups — a hierarchy in which the worker is different and better than the client, who is “Other”: lesser than in almost every way. The chapters in this book challenge that idea.

This book is also a challenge to the Anglo-American child welfare paradigm that shapes all current Canadian child welfare policy and practice. We use the term “Anglo-American” rather than “White” in recognition that some White countries (for example, Belgium, Netherlands and Germany) operate child welfare systems oriented to collaboration and family preservation (for a discussion of different child welfare paradigms, see Cameron et al. 2007). We centre Indigenous perspectives because these approaches are based in the paradigm of community caring (Cameron et al. 2007) that we consider essential to transforming child welfare. We also foreground Indigenous voices in recognition of the vastly disproportionate over-representation of Indigenous children and families on child welfare caseloads across Canada. This book therefore represents a radical departure from most other child welfare texts, which relegate Indigenous perspectives to a single chapter or subsume them and other non-Anglo-American ideas in a chapter on “cultural competence.” Anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches to child welfare practice require us to understand any differences between ourselves and those we work with not as technical challenges that can be met through understanding the “Other” but

as fundamentally related to power and our own positionality. The first three chapters consider these matters in detail.

While all social work encounters are shaped by power and oppression, we contend that this is particularly so in child welfare because child welfare workers are given the right, through their mandate, to investigate, monitor, assess and dispose of cases in ways that have far-reaching impacts on children, families and communities. In anti-oppressive theory, power is understood as widely dispersed rather than only held by one group and wielded over another group. Individual workers therefore have a choice about whether to produce social justice or reproduce social injustice through how they practice. Our encounters with clients must be placed in a specific time and place so that we can understand the meaning of these experiences in terms of prevailing ideologies, social facts and cultural differences. We must be self-reflective, always considering how our values, beliefs and location are affecting our interactions with people we are working with — the intention being to understand these interactions not in psychological terms, but in terms of sociology, history, ethics and politics. We must be committed to transparency; people we work with must know what we are doing and how we are doing it, and have ample opportunity, without fear of consequence, to reflect on and comment on what we are doing and how we are doing it. We must consider who we believe ourselves accountable to, and why. And we must constantly challenge oppression, not only within larger systems, but also in our interactions, in the organization we work for and within ourselves. Within the current child welfare context, this is a challenge indeed!

Over the last few decades standardized procedures such as risk and safety assessments, legal reporting requirements and managerial processes have proliferated in Canadian child welfare, leaving little room for worker discretion. Students and new workers are taught to regard policy manuals and practice standards as child welfare's "bible" and come to expect that careful attention to these prescriptions will produce the child welfare miracle: every situation successfully resolved. Many of us sitting in our offices on a Friday afternoon with six siblings to place in a resource that does not exist have hoped for these miracles. Although child welfare practice can be one of the most rewarding careers in social work, the current context means that child welfare practice is also challenging and sometimes difficult. This book offers a way through those challenges and difficulties that affirms the strengths and wisdom of those with whom we work. While we envision that the primary audience for this book will be social work students, instructors and practitioners connected to child welfare, we believe the content will be useful to human service practitioners in many related disciplines. For example, the chapters that address violence, working with youth, addictions and other critical topics are applicable to a cross section of professional and academic readers. We hope the book will be used by child welfare's collateral partners in various ministries and community social services. Finally, we hope that the book informs decision-makers who may be looking at ways to improve the delivery of services for children and families.

If there is one reason above all others why we put this book together it is because, although so little has changed in child welfare, we believe that it can and must change, both systemically and in practice. The statistics documenting the number of Indigenous children in care haunt us. The larger story of child welfare parallels our own experiences: those who come to the attention of child welfare are disproportionately poor Indigenous women. Although White children and families have always fared better and continue to do so, we know that poor, racialized, disabled and otherwise marginalized children and families are also vulnerable to the child welfare system.

This collection brings together practitioners, researchers and theorists who are committed to transforming child welfare. We believe them to be some of the most significant voices in Canadian child welfare, people who have greatly influenced our own practice and teaching. The chapters in this book share many commonalities, most importantly that they ask us in each moment in practice to “see double.” This means that we must understand the situations of the families and children we work with in the context of the larger structural problems they are facing and at the same time understand what we need to do on the ground in the moment. In one way or another each of these chapters also reminds us that we must be continually engaged in the journey from the head to the heart if we are to be effective, compassionate and respectful practitioners. And many writers emphasize that traditional Indigenous childcare methods have worked since time immemorial and thus we must be mindful of Indigenous ways of knowing, always aware that the need for child welfare will only change once issues such as Indigenous sovereignty, reparation to Indigenous peoples, poverty and wealth disparity are dealt with in some significant manner.

### **The Context of Practice**

State intervention in Canadian families in the name of protecting children has been happening for more than a century. Over this time, child welfare legislation and policies have oscillated between high-intervention/many-apprehension and low-intervention/few-apprehension paradigms (Dumbrill 2006). Periodic concern that the state is too intrusive into the private sphere of the family has alternated with demands for greater state involvement in the wake of high profile child death inquiries. Currently we are in a high intervention cycle, where in Ontario, for example, in the period 1998 to 2004 apprehensions increased by 65 percent (Dumbrill 2006: 12).

Mandatory reporting laws, x-ray technology, which facilitated the diagnosis of physical child abuse, and feminist activism about child sexual abuse and violence against women all contributed to the expansion of definitions of abuse and neglect and the creation of new categories of child maltreatment that are said to require state surveillance, monitoring and intervention (Vine et al. 2006).

As many writers note (see, for example, Blackstock 2008; Lindsey 2003; Roberts 2002; Swift 1995), child welfare does not intervene in every family experiencing problems. The primary determinants of whether or not a family comes

to the attention of child welfare authorities are race and poverty. As detailed in the *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples*, the child welfare system across Canada has been marked by the consistent over-representation of Indigenous children in care (Government of Canada 1996; Mirwaldt 2004). In Canada today, Indigenous children and families are still vastly over-represented on child welfare caseloads. There are three times as many Indigenous children in care today as there were at the height of the operation of residential schools in the 1940s (Mandell et al. 2007: 117). Although provincial child welfare data vary, it is estimated that across Canada 38 percent of children in care (approximately 25,000 of the 66,000) are Indigenous despite representing only 5 percent of the child population in Canada. A report exploring the numbers of children in care in three sample provinces found that although non-Indigenous children represented over 92 percent of the overall child population in these provinces, only 0.67 percent of non-Indigenous children were in care as of May 2005, compared to 3.31 percent of Métis children and 10.23 percent of Status Indian children (Blackstock et al. 2004).

In an attempt to explain these percentages, Thobani (2007: 119) notes that the “residential school system institutionalized the idea that Aboriginal families were incommensurable with the national ideal and that the welfare of Aboriginal children was in conflict with that of their families and communities, including that of their mothers.” In the colonial context Indigenous peoples in Canada have experienced many significant losses, including, to name but a few, land, children, language and spiritual practices (Bellefeuille and Ricks 2003; Scarth 2004; Schouls 2002; Youngblood Henderson 2000). Although the rest of Canadian children were viewed as being dependent upon their families, Indigenous children were denied this right through residential schools and the child welfare system, which “pathologized individual Aboriginal mothers and their families as deficient, further enhancing personalized definitions of this lack” (Thobani 2007: 123). Schouls (2002: 15) explains that

the ability for Canadians to *justify* the innumerable documented acts of injustice against Aboriginal peoples on the grounds that European culture was more “modern” and thus “superior” stands as a legacy of the distortion still reflected in today’s relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. (italics in original)

Youngblood Henderson (2000: 17) describes colonialism as an ideology that created a “massive hemorrhage” and a “traumatic legacy” in Indigenous communities in Canada. He asserts that one of the many consequences of colonialism is that the norms of colonized societies were altered, including relationships between adults and children. For example, Bellefeuille and Ricks (2003: 24) discuss the *protection paradigm* in child welfare services as part of a systematic approach utilized in a “practice orientation based on individual deficit,” beliefs that stand in opposition to the Indigenous worldview of child development as holistic. They suggest that this approach has been a causal factor in “a model that has

caused so much damage to Aboriginal families and communities” (Bellefeuille and Ricks 2003: 24).

Bennett and Shangreux (2005: 92) note that “non-Aboriginal social workers often do not understand the depth of feelings and the impact that past historical policies and practices have on First Nation peoples today.” Alternatively, Indigenous child welfare workers are also challenged to how best work in their own families and communities. Michelle Reid (2005: 30) notes that the Indigenous child and family services practitioners who participated in her research “discussed the ‘pressure’ and the ‘pain’ of working under delegated models within their communities where they are dealing with the ongoing ‘impacts of colonization’ and do not want to be seen as ‘perpetrators of colonialism’ within their own people.” These practitioners are exceptions; those who intervene with poor, Indigenous and otherwise marginalized children and families have always been and still are disproportionately White and middle class. The differences between workers and clients are remarkable. The most recent extant survey reveals that workers are 94 percent White; 80 percent female; 97 percent with English as their primary language; 70 percent between the ages of twenty-six to forty-four; and only 2 percent Indigenous (Fallon et al. 2003: 45). Although occupying a socially powerful race and class position does not disqualify someone from child welfare practice, it is essential for practitioners to recognize that hierarchical power relations are always embedded in child welfare encounters and that they must be actively resisted or they will simply be reproduced.

During the 1980s, some provinces attempted to balance support and protection functions in child welfare, but stringent fiscal restraint policies introduced during that decade led to designating family support as discretionary and tied to the availability of funds. The shift to a system almost exclusively concerned with the protection of children rather than with their welfare was accelerated by high profile child death inquiries. These inquiries typically focused on administrative and technical failures and the conduct of individual workers and parents while ignoring important contextual matters such as poverty, lack of resources and supports and the impacts of residential schools and the “sixties scoop.” Child welfare legislation enacted in most Canadian provinces in the wake of these inquiries enshrined “best interests of the child” as a foundational principle guiding policy and practice, severing concern for children from concern for their families. With the protection of individual children as its mission, child welfare concerned itself with investigating, documenting and intervening with parental failure and inadequacy, while the provision of support and resources to families experiencing difficulties was significantly reduced.

The 1990s saw the rise of the “risk regime” (Parton 1999) in child welfare, which extended child protection categories beyond children who had demonstrably suffered harm to include children that were “likely” to suffer harm. This change contributed to a substantial increase in reports, investigations and court-based interventions (Vine et al. 2006). The development of what Beck (1992) termed the “risk society” occurred in concert with the circulation of the

neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility, which conditions us to believe that bad outcomes can be averted by avoiding, reducing or ameliorating risks and that the responsibility for doing so is a personal one. Risk ideology is effective in transforming social problems into individual problems. What it means in child welfare is that workers are indoctrinated into the idea that harm to children can be prevented if risk is properly assessed, reduced or eliminated. Thus the state has become more intrusive at the same time that family supports have been eroded through the shredding of the social safety net, marked by several social policy changes: welfare rates reduced and further restrictions imposed on who may receive welfare and how long they may receive it (Mosher 2008); increased surveillance and threatening of welfare recipients and the creation of welfare snitch lines (Chan and Mirchandani 2007); reduction in the availability of subsidized childcare spaces everywhere in Canada except Quebec; reduction in the availability of social housing; and a general reduction in most child welfare-related support services. In other words, the state increased risks for poor and otherwise marginalized children by withdrawing, restricting or reducing benefits and entitlements at the same time that risk assessment procedures made eliminating risk an individual responsibility. Workers were no longer able to consider “environmental factors” and “lack of supports” when assessing families (Dumbrill 2006: 11) even though changes in social policies increased the influence of these factors. As Chen (2005: 143) notes, the “risk assessment model embodies the paradigm shift from considering certain aspects of reality to be social problems to considering them to be risk factors.” Risk assessment models keep the child welfare focus narrow, emphasizing individual issues rather than the structural ones that underlie poverty, violence and homelessness (Barter 2005).

Neglect has contributed greatly to the increase in reported child maltreatment in Canada, as demonstrated by the comparison of Canadian data between 1998 and 2003. During this five-year period, the number of substantiated neglect cases almost doubled (Trocmé et al. 2005). As the Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) demonstrates, neglect is closely intertwined with poverty. In the CIS-2003, 24 percent of all children experiencing substantiated maltreatment were reported to live in families relying on benefits, employment insurance or social assistance; only 41 percent of those experiencing neglect lived in homes where a caregiver had full-time employment (Trocmé et al. 2005). As in 1998, in the CIS-2003, children who experienced substantiated maltreatment of any kind were more frequently reported to reside in a home with a lone parent at the time of the investigation (39 percent lone female, 4 percent lone male) (Trocmé et al. 2005). Census data collected in 2001 indicate that 18 percent of Canadian families were led by a lone female parent while two parents led 78 percent of families (Statistics Canada 2001). Most single mother-led families are poor; in 2001, 42.4 percent of these families had incomes below the poverty line (Silver 2007). While the general poverty rate is about the same now as it was in 1980, child poverty has increased and the poverty rate for Indigenous children (40 percent) is twice that for non-Indigenous children (Silver 2007).

Blackstock (2008: 9) points out that over 60 percent of cases of child welfare involvement for Indigenous children are due to neglect that is directly related to poverty. Other racialized groups (not white in colour or non-Caucasian in race) also have a much higher likelihood of being poor; the incidence of poverty for members of these groups is double that for the Canadian population at large (Galabuzi 2006, cited in Silver 2007). While poverty is increasing among the marginalized (Indigenous people, single mothers, immigrants, members of racialized groups), the rich are getting richer. Earnings among the richest fifth of Canadians grew 16.4 percent between 1980 and 2005, while the poorest fifth of the population saw earnings tumble 20.6 percent over this time period (Statistics Canada 2006).

In the early twenty-first century much of what began in the 1990s continues in the wake of more child death inquiries. Public reviews and media accounts of sensational child death cases invariably find individual parents (most often mothers) and individual social workers (“state mothers”) to blame. The blaming of individual social workers is ironic because often they are following the policy priority, set in the 1980s, of least intrusive measures (Swift 2001: 66) and because few resources exist to support families. Since the mid-1980s high profile child death inquiries have served as the focal point for examining and reforming child welfare legislation, policies and practices in Canada in a particular direction: towards a more forensic approach to investigating, assessing and documenting the individual failures and inadequacies of individual parents. These alleged failures and inadequacies are responded to primarily through surveillance and threat of sanction (the temporary or permanent loss of children to state care) rather than with compassion, support and resources. This is not to say that individual workers do not care about and attempt to assist the families with whom they work — instances of anti-racist, anti-oppressive, respectful engagement with children and parents are a regular and daily occurrence in child welfare. But when risk assessment and related managerial procedures define abuse and neglect as brought about solely through the actions or inactions of individual “bad” parents, and there is no space on required forms for other interpretations, it is very difficult for individual workers to resist these ways of thinking and talking. Workers understand that they too are under constant surveillance through compulsory audit and review procedures, practising amidst what Rose (1996: 18) calls “a plethora of practices of blame.”

Child welfare’s devolution into child protection is not the way it has to be. The practices and policies that evolved over the last few decades do not represent better and more progressive practice, though they do “exemplify the privatization of citizenship and individualization of responsibility” (Chen 2005: 146). Risk management is the predominant technology of current Anglo-American child welfare systems, and most other practices flow from and are oriented around it. For example, while 92 percent of workers in the CIS had been trained in risk assessment, only 32 percent had training in family preservation interventions (Fallon et al. 2003). Applying risk technologies serves to simultaneously enact

hierarchical power relations and render them invisible. While resisting and transforming child welfare practices at the micro-level are important and necessary, this is not enough.

Pleas for government to attend to the matters of race, class, gender and ability disparity implicated in almost all child welfare difficulties have been numerous and well-articulated (see, for example, Callahan 1993; Cameron et al. 2007; Lindsey 2003; Roberts 2002; Swift 1995). Yet in the years since Pelton (1978) exposed the myth of classlessness in child abuse and neglect, little positive change has taken place in Anglo-American child welfare. Once provinces and territories took over responsibility for Indigenous child welfare at the end of the residential school era, the number of Indigenous children in care skyrocketed and has stayed at those high levels. The federal government was responsible for instituting and administering residential schools yet continues to ignore its obligation to restore Indigenous families and communities through adequate resource allocations for Indigenous child and family services. Present efforts to support Indigenous child welfare agencies are doomed to failure because the policy context is one of continuing to control and monitor Indigenous populations through funding formulas that privilege child protection over prevention, family preservation and support. For example, federal funding formulas for First Nations and Indigenous agencies primarily provide funding solely for the apprehension of children rather than supportive or preventative work with families (Blackstock 2005). Although differential or alternative response models that use interventions like family group conferencing, mediation and alternative dispute resolution are being developed and implemented in some jurisdictions (Trocmé et al. 2003), workers are discouraged from pursuing these for all but the most benign situations. Indigenous approaches to child welfare that emphasize the involvement of community, Elders and extended family hold promise but even in situations where Indigenous people have assumed authority for child welfare services these services are delivered under the auspices of existing legislation, resulting in “the lack of a cultural fit between child welfare, ideology, law and services delivered” (Mandell et al. 2007: 152).

These examples could suggest that child welfare cannot be reformed and that child welfare workers can only practise oppressively. Yet we know from research with child welfare clients that anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice can and does happen even within the strictures of an oppressive system (Callahan et al. 1998; de Boer and Coody 2007; Dumbrill 2006). While we must advocate for socially just child welfare and social policies to enhance the climate for socially just practice, we can and must ensure that we engage in this way of practising now. This book is a contribution to that possibility.

### **Walking This Path Together: Our Stories**

Because we realize that engaging in anti-racist, anti-oppressive and respectful practice in child welfare, especially given the context we have outlined, is extremely challenging, we would like to share a little more of our stories so that readers

know how our own commitment to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice came to be. We present this in the form of the conversation between us.

*Susan: I entered child welfare with a great deal of knowledge about social justice and a commitment to practise in socially just ways but persistently found my attempts thwarted. I worked initially in northern Manitoba in Cree and Saulteaux communities, and it was very clear to me that problems I saw were fundamentally related to displacement from traditional lands and lives. All the families I worked with had been devastated by residential schools and loss of traditional territories, yet all that I had learned about social justice really didn't help me much to figure out how to be in practice.*

*I believe that anti-oppressive practice is equally possible when children are taken into care and when they are left at home, in part because I was a child who needed to be apprehended. When I did go home briefly at age fifteen, my worker talked about it as if it was a punishment and I experienced it as a punishment. I wanted to stay in care and didn't understand why it was so difficult for the system to find me a safe and caring place to be. While I was in care I still had lots of contact with my family, with my brother and sister, grandparents, aunts and uncles, but I didn't have to live at home with my father and stepmother, where it was really dangerous. I don't remember the social worker making efforts to maintain these relationships but I remember everyone in my family making an effort to stay in touch with me while I was in care. In many ways being in care really worked for me and perhaps it was not so difficult because I still had connection to my family.*

*From my present perspective I understand that because I am White, workers did not see a need to separate me from my connections because I did not need to be assimilated. Perhaps my workers even thought I needed to stay in touch with the better parts of my family to successfully become a nice White middle-class girl. Most of the girls I was in care with, in the home for girls and on the street, were Indigenous. Because I was White it was easier for me to "look promising," which I know increased the efforts social workers made on my behalf and my access to resources.*

*Sohki Aski Esquao [Jeannine]: It seems that the agenda was different for each of us. Susan lived in kinship arrangements and yet this did not seem possible for Aboriginal kids. Being White made you look promising and you have such a leg up being viewed as one of the kids who "made it" (finished school, held off on having children despite the odds). It's much harder to look promising if you are Indigenous. This relates to the policies of the time where Indigenous children were viewed as "illegitimate, un-adoptable, unworthy" of having a caring family.*

*Social workers had a lot of power in our lives and it seemed important to be grateful. I remember that my original reason for being a social worker was because I thought I could do a much better job than the models I had.*

*Susan: My understanding of how to engage in socially just practice has been a long*

*time coming and is still under construction. Some of the Indigenous teachings that I have been given and exposed to along with anti-oppressive practice ideas helped me figure out how to put social justice into practice. My experiences working in child protection were a study in contrasts. In the North I worked only with Indigenous peoples and then I worked in a part of the B.C. interior which had once been densely populated with Indigenous people but there was not a single Indigenous person left. So I went from thinking that child welfare was all about race to thinking that child welfare was all about poverty. Now I know that it is those two things together that make the perfect child welfare storm. If you are poor and not White and have children you are almost certain to have child welfare show up at your door sooner or later. Until anti-oppressive practice came along I didn't really understand how to braid together that kind of analysis with my professional practice even though I learned much about respectful, strengths-based engagement from my B.C. child welfare colleagues. Since I came to live in the Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth territories and had the opportunity to work in Indigenous communities, I feel that who I am and what I do is much more open to examination and that is a good thing. This is not information I received in my social work education or as a registered social worker. What I received from Indigenous teachings was that I had to live and work what I said I believed in.*

*One of my first experiences in research involved interviewing young women in care – young women like me and like the girls I was with on the street. What they told me about their experiences in child welfare saddened me because it was clear that not much of any significance has changed. I think particularly about one young Indigenous woman who came to her interview with a whole file of clippings about colonization, residential schools and the sixties scoop because she thought she needed to prove to me that Indigenous people came to involvement with child welfare for these reasons. This experience fuelled my commitment to changing child welfare and my recognition that for Indigenous peoples it has to change within the context of a history of child welfare trying to destroy Indigenous peoples.*

*Sohki Aski Esquao [Jeannine]: I remember working in foster care and removing kids from what was documented as the most deplorable conditions; however, these kids wanted to go home. That was their first choice and I knew that for the most part, these kids were never going home. We spoke of permanency planning while Elders cautioned us that nothing is permanent.*

*I was fortunate that some of my early teachers were Elders and that I was able to take these teachings and combine them in social work practice when it was a very new concept to include spirituality in practice. I found that working with young people from those teachings as well as an anti-oppressive lens was making a difference in how these young people perceived hope in their lives. I also learned much from some of my predecessors in Indigenous child welfare, such as First Nation agency directors from the 1970s (Blackfoot Tribal Services — now Siksika Nation Child and Family Services Agreement, in Alberta and the Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council in Manitoba) and how*

*they were the forerunners in taking back the administration of child and family services in our own communities and with our own ways of caring for children. It wasn't long before Métis agencies were also set up to deliver services from a Métis perspective.*

*I became convinced that extended families had as much and more to give our children than strangers and that with support they could become the preferred arrangement for Indigenous kids in need of protection. I always felt that I was accountable to my community as well or maybe more so than my employer if I was working for a ministry. This was a tough balancing act but one that was worth the risk. At the end of the day, I wanted to be the type of social worker who did not give up on those important community and cultural connections for Indigenous children. If I ever forgot, I knew that someone from the Indigenous community would come and remind me of who I was and where I came from. You cannot separate your personal location from your professional work as an Indigenous social worker in whatever community you work.*

*Those kids I worked with for the most part did not have regular contact or didn't know what happened to their families, and they had fears, anxiety and some fantasies about what was going on in their family. It seemed to be such an effort to first of all know who their extended family was and where they were, to maintain connections with them and facilitate those connections, because drivers were expensive and cultural resources were scarce.*

*For a few years I was involved in special case reviews of Indigenous children who died in ministry foster care and community agency care. Those were troubled times in my career as I cautiously reviewed files, case notes and interview notes with the workers involved. I took my role very seriously as the voice for the children who had passed to another world. I was reminded of how important recordkeeping is and how children and their families are portrayed in case notes. My heart also reached toward social workers who felt they had done what they could and carried a burden of guilt for not having done more. For me, the heart of this book is those children, who inspire me to this day.*

*My life has come full circle. I came into this world as a Métis child adopted into a non-Métis family. My adoption story has been woven into my professional life to remind me of some important teachings I wish to uphold. Now I am in an academic position conducting research on cultural planning and adoption of Indigenous children. I don't believe in coincidence — I believe in possibilities. My life could have been very different, and I am grateful that the possibilities that lay before me include an exploration of this important work, guided by my ancestors and all those who are my mentors in this world and the next. There is no resting place away from the world of child welfare until every Indigenous child is confident in their place of family, community and ancestral knowledge and until there is non-judgmental help freely available for every family that is struggling, whatever the reason. Although we both said we would never work in child welfare, we have both found our place of work.*

*Thus, we extend this invitation to all who might read this book.*

### The Invitation — Oriah Mountain Dreamer

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.

I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain. I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own without moving to hide it or face it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own, if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, to be realistic, to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul; if you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see beauty, even when it's not pretty, every day, and if you can source your own life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand on the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, "Yes!"

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