



ALL MY RELATIONS: WORLDVIEWS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA

AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESOURCE

JoAnne Formanek Gustafson



A few months ago, I participated in an interview about my experience growing up in Treaty 3 territory. As usual, talking about my life brought me back to childhood moments with my mom, siblings, and extended maternal family. The stories are partially composed of my own memories, peppered with comments offered by assorted family members. I don't know how accurate the details are, but the connections are real and that's what really matters. The day of that interview also marked the beginning of this lesson plan for Grades 7-12.

Over the past 15 years, I've had many discussions about what it means to be Anishinaabe. I've talked to other Anishinaabeg and other Indigenous peoples, my relatives across Treaty 3 and beyond, and community members at home, nearby, and all over Turtle Island (North America). I've learned from many knowledgeable

people, in Western institutions and at community gatherings, with Anishinaabe from across the province and from friends in my kitchen. This has become part of my story, intertwined as it should be. It feels right to say this.

The only way I can share what I've learned is to share my story. It starts on New Year's Eve, 2023, then branches out in different directions, linking to important teachings I have received over the years. These teachings have helped me put my own experiences into a conceptual framework that makes sense, allowing me to see the Anishinaabe worldview alongside Western values.

I sometimes make connections to historical events that were hidden from public awareness for most of Canada's history. It is essential that both children and adults have the chance to learn how these events caused the interruption of knowledge sharing in Indigenous families and communities. There are many possible pieces that I could share with you; I've chosen stories about Indigenous peoples from across Canada so that you can see the similar attitudes and values we share. It's important to recognize that there is no single story or worldview for Indigenous peoples, even within the same Nation. I encourage you to always be open to new stories that will allow you to expand your understanding.

It's my hope that educators will find these lessons about worldview useful, as will their students. The concepts may seem simple—they are! It's easy to dismiss how deeply these values of relationality reach into Anishinaabe worldview; even for those who have been separated from their cultural teachings, this learning unlocks new answers. *Miigwech bizindawiyeg* / Thank you for listening to me.



It's New Year's Eve, 2023, the end of a long, hard year. My partner, who had been sick for almost a year, left on his (spirit) journey in June and weeks later I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I have three adult children, two grandchildren, and a dog. It has been a lot to deal with.

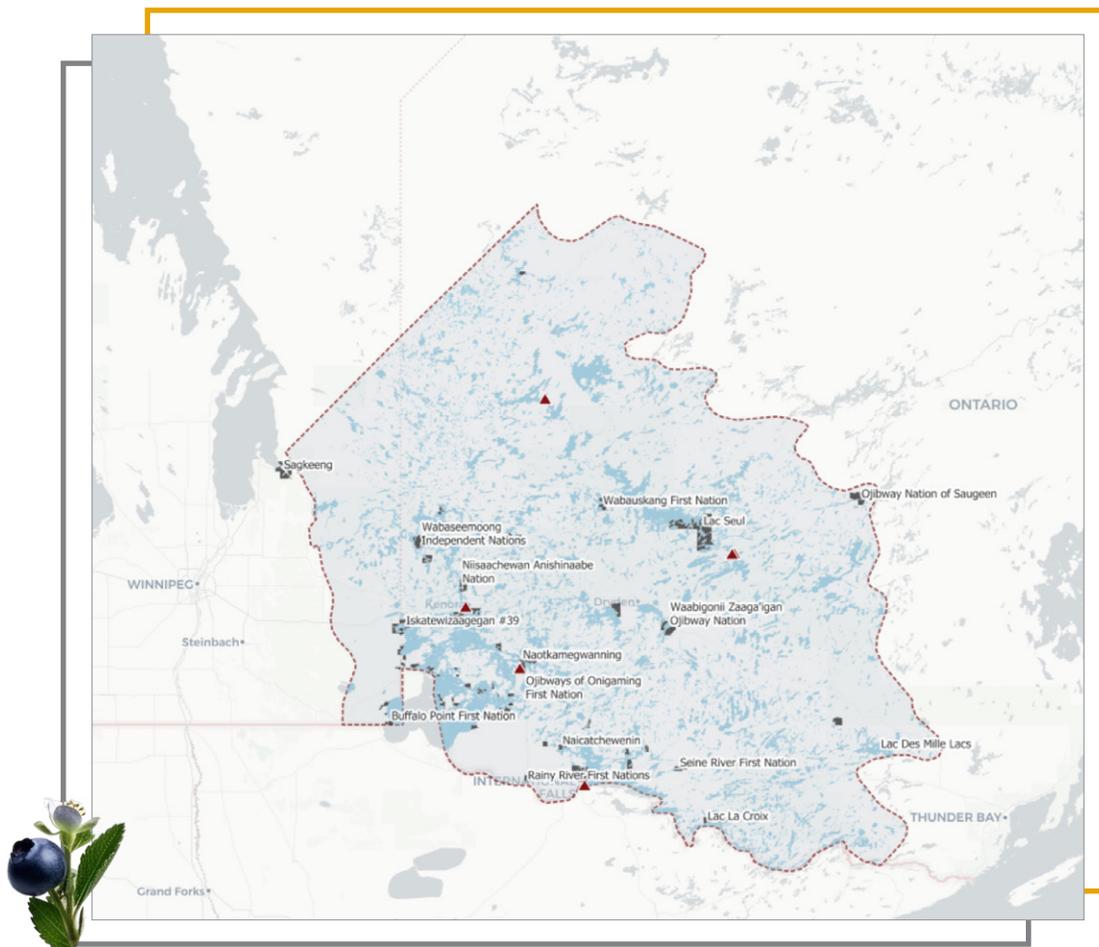
On this New Year's evening, I felt compelled to make a sacred fire as part of the ceremony I carry to hold space for my partner. My responsibility is to do what I can to support his journey into the spirit world. Tonight, this includes a fire, along with offerings of food and *asemaa* (tobacco), which carries prayers. Through following these teachings, I honour this loved one and the continuation of his journey while also nurturing my own healing and wellness. I'm grateful for what I've learned; although "*bangii eta go ninitaa*" (I only know a little bit), I'm comforted by doing what I can. I know that Knowledge Keepers are out there to help me when I'm ready to ask.

The sacred fire teachings I hold came from [Judy Da Silva](#) of [Asubpeeschoseewagong](#) (Grassy Narrows), a community located in the heart of Treaty 3 territory. While many Knowledge Keepers reserve the role of keeper of the sacred fire for men, Da Silva believes that women must also carry these teachings in order to remove barriers

that prevent them from accessing the important ceremonies that strengthen the communities they—we—are building.

An activist with decades of experience, Da Silva works within her community to help women develop and carry the cultural practices and teachings of the Anishinaabe as tools for healing, wellness, and advocacy. Da Silva knows that maintaining the ties to the land, the medicines, the spirits, and each other is essential to empowering communities, building the capacity of women to lead, and supporting the spiritual, cultural, and physical needs of her community. She shows us how Anishinaabeg (and other Indigenous peoples) can draw on the strength of our practices—built on thousands of years of living on this land—to carry us through and beyond the struggles of the past few hundred years.

I'm in awe of her, and yet in person she is comfortably welcoming and compassionate, humble and knowledgeable. Women from many communities attend gatherings where she shares what she knows, inviting others to take up their own leadership when they're ready to step up. Women like Da Silva empower us to be our best, comforting our fears about whether we know enough to help others; she assures us that we are enough and that we only need to keep showing up to continue to learn. Judy Da Silva supports women to take up leadership.



TREATY #3 TERRITORY. Source: Grand Council Treaty #3 <https://gct3.ca/land/territorial-planning-unit>

I'll go back to my childhood now. My name is JoAnne Formanek Gustafson. I am [Anishinaabe](#) (Ojibwe) on my mother's side, a member of [Couchiching First Nation](#), located on the southern border of [Treaty 3 territory](#) on Rainy Lake near where the lake flows into the Rainy River. My father is Canadian-born, a child of first-generation Polish Canadians. I had very little contact with my dad or his family growing up, so my experiences and values came almost entirely from my maternal family.

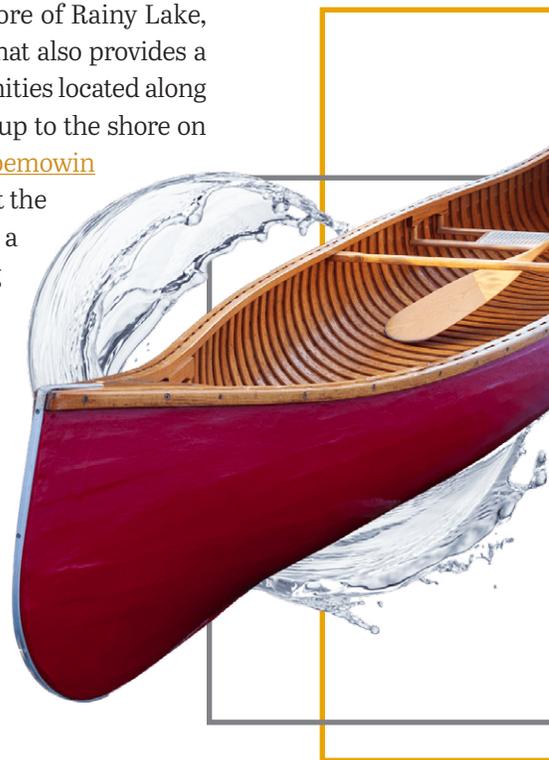
Like many [Anishinaabeg](#) (Ojibwe people) my maternal grandparents were a big part of the lives of my two siblings and me. They often showed up at our house in town with bags of groceries; my mom was a single mother and relied on their help to feed and clothe us. When I was almost seven years old, my siblings and I moved in with our grandparents for five or six years.

My grandparents' house was located at the edge of the reserve. We had only two neighbours which included three other children, all of them cousins. Summer or winter, we spent most of our time playing outside, running along the lakeshore through water or snow, or over the ice. We wore trails through the bush that carried landmarks we alone knew. Cold weather was no deterrent—in winter we trekked across the lake with our toboggan in tow and peanut butter and jam sandwiches in our pockets.

We saw the first buds of spring, heard the frogs and crickets singing during the long summer days and evenings, and walked on “icebergs” during ice-out in spring. We learned balance by jumping from rock to rock along the shore, and improved our flexibility by avoiding the branches that whipped at faces as we ran along the trails. Carrots were plucked from the garden and wiped clean on pants before we bit into the crisp, delicious flesh; alternately, handfuls of blueberries straight from bush to mouth quenched thirst and hunger. We were on the land as much as we could be. The land was our teacher.

Summer season brought many visitors. My grandparents' house was on the “canoe channel” that runs northwest/southeast along the western shore of Rainy Lake, protected from rough weather and waves by a chain of islands that also provides a resting place for travellers. There were two First Nations communities located along this channel, so as a child I frequently saw Anishinaabeg paddle up to the shore on their way to town. My grandparents, fluent speakers of [Anishinaabemowin](#) (Ojibwe language, often called simply “the language”), would meet the visitors as they landed and sometimes provided a ride to town a few kilometres away. But they always started with a visit, speaking with these relatives and friends in the language, their shared laughter blending with the musical flow of the words.

I longed to know what they were talking about, and occasionally asked, but they would only smile back, kindness showing in their crinkled-up eyes and the always-present laughter. Now I know that many of these older folks did not speak [Zhaaganaashiimowin](#) (English) but they did recognize my curiosity nonetheless; a curious child looks about the same in any language. Like my grandparents, these people had



been conditioned by the Indian Residential Schools not to teach the young people Anishinaabe language or ceremonies. They knew the harm that the children would experience if they practiced their culture.

I wonder now how they felt keeping this a secret from us. Did my eagerness remind them of their own experiences in the schools? I've heard many Elders speak about how difficult and how painful it was to hide cultural knowledge and practices from their children and grandchildren, however, they knew this was the only way to protect them. I've learned that we've all been impacted by the deep trauma that many generations of Anishinaabeg endured. But I've strayed from the story—let me return.

Eagerness to learn never left me, and in adulthood I've had many opportunities to learn the language and teachings denied me as a child. Through this I've found self-acceptance in my identity as [Anishinaabekwe](#) (Anishinaabe woman), leading to a feeling of belonging within my relationships with other Anishinaabeg. Finding teachers and Knowledge Keepers has helped me look back at my life and experiences and see the connection with the lands, the water, and all other living things differently, in a way that makes sense to me. I've developed my own understanding of how the Anishinaabeg (along with other Indigenous peoples around the world) see themselves within all that exists (all our relations) and how this shapes our values about the responsibilities we have toward the land, the water, and the ways we as humans act upon the earth.

The concept of worldview will be the focus of the learning activities that follow: to pause and consider how Anishinaabeg language and culture creates a way of seeing the world that is different from mainstream Western worldviews in a Canadian and North American context. This important, foundational understanding will prepare students to re-examine popular misconceptions and myths as they begin to consider the complexities that exist in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada, within the confines of treaties as well as the Indian Act.

Educators vary in their own knowledge and experience. As Justice Murray Sinclair [explained](#) in a 2015 interview, “for generations ... public schools have fed them misinformation about Aboriginal people.” It's important that educators actively seek learning opportunities about Canada's history with First Nations, Métis, and the Inuit, taking time to understand the nature of Indigenous beliefs, cultural practices, and languages. Anishinaabe culture and teachings vary from community to community, which is why it is crucial to find learning opportunities close to home. Creating lasting relationships with individual Knowledge Holders, Elders, and organizations will allow you to prepare your classroom (and your heart) to bring Indigenous peoples into it. I encourage you to make this a personal goal.

Finally, I have a simple piece of advice for you. Unlearning and re-learning can be an emotional process for non-Indigenous people, especially in this context. You may experience moments of grief and shame as you learn. As tempting as it may be to debrief with an Indigenous colleague or resource person, this is something to



approach with caution, while applying a trauma-informed lens. Remember that Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders are already extending themselves to contribute to education. They've undoubtedly been impacted by personal and intergenerational trauma. They'll require time to attend to their own needs and should not be expected or asked to carry the emotional load for another person.

Don't despair—great learning opportunities exist that will help you work through these feelings. Many education unions and school boards offer workshops that are designed to support you through this process and help you understand your own emotional responses. You will pass through this discomfort and come out with new perspectives and skills. I wish you well on this learning journey and encourage you to be gentle and curious, patient and generous.

Gigawaabamin miinawaa—I'll see you again sometime!

