

Roots

FINDING BALANCE

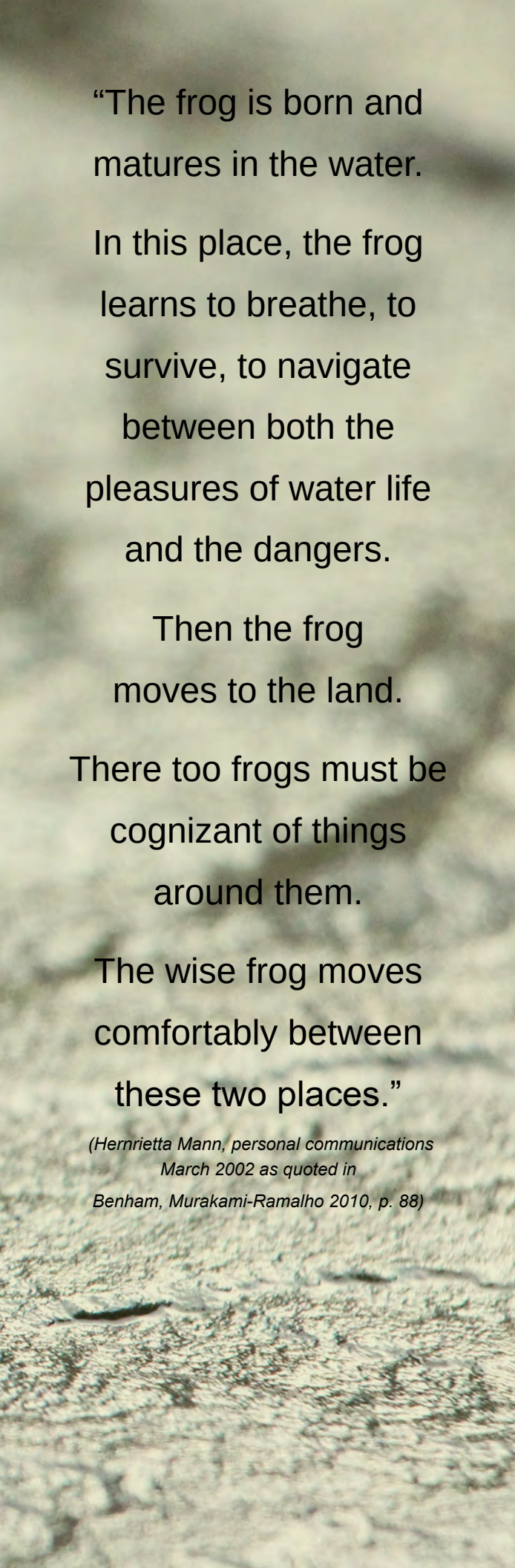


by

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“The frog is born and
matures in the water.
In this place, the frog
learns to breathe, to
survive, to navigate
between both the
pleasures of water life
and the dangers.
Then the frog
moves to the land.
There too frogs must be
cognizant of things
around them.
The wise frog moves
comfortably between
these two places.”

*(Henrietta Mann, personal communications
March 2002 as quoted in
Benham, Murakami-Ramalho 2010, p. 88)*

Like the frog, Indigenous leaders must find ways to balance their Indigenous leadership style within the Westernized colonial educational school system. The balance is set between two very different worlds, one with the free-flowing water (Indigenous world view), and the other with the vast openness of the land (Westernized world view). Like the frog, Indigenous leaders must stay close to where they are born, within the water, in order to thrive. Indigenous leaders need to stay close to their roots within the educational system in order to be able to carve out the Indigenous space needed for a more wholistic approach within the current educational system.

When one thinks of the term ‘leadership’ or ‘leader’ what comes to mind? Is it the qualities of the person that makes them a strong leader, or is it their actions? Is leadership about the person or the role that they play within the organization or community in which they lead? Within their work on Indigenous educational leadership, Julien, Wright, & Zinni (2010) unpack the many different factors that play a role in how great leaders lead. Their conclusions, outlining the many traits, suggests that there are multiple layers that create a leader within our educational system. For these authors, leadership is a complex role that is dependent on many factors. Two key factors affecting this role are organizational culture and the dominant norms. Julien et al. contend that these two factors shape our educational leaders and their roles within the Westernized colonial education system.

When it comes to the topic of educational leadership, what comes to mind is the Western leadership style typically a managerial-type role within the school, that reflects Western society culture and values. As suggested by House, Javidan, Hanges & Dorfman's research (2002), the dominant culture and society's norms create what is to be expected from our educational leaders. This influences other leaders within the system to shift and change their leadership style in order to be accepted within the existing culture of the system.

And yet, as our current educational perspectives are shifting, as a Vice-Principal I am seeing within my own school district an educational shift where more Indigenous people are starting to take up leadership opportunities within the educational system.

When one thinks of the term 'leadership' or 'leader', what comes to mind?

Is it the qualities of the person that makes them a strong leader, or is it their actions?

The challenge that comes with this shift is understanding and recognizing the two very different – and sometimes opposing – styles of leadership, Western and Indigenous. This challenges Indigenous people to stay true to who they are, and tries to confine them to a specific style of leadership that is acceptable within the Westernized school system. Indigenous leaders are like the frog in the story: they must find ways to balance their Indigenous leadership style within the Westernized colonial educational school system.

Within their research, Julien, Wright, & Zinni (2010) found that Indigenous leaders lead in a more wholistic style, in comparison to Westernized leadership that compartmentalizes people and items. Indigenous leaders come to the work as members of the community, holding up respect and relationship as the highest standards. They do not come to the work as managers or 'boss' figures, they come in service to the greater good.

Indigenous leaders are not afraid to get their hands in the work and to get dirty. They feel that their role is to support and guide within the system. It comes from a place of interconnectedness, which is in opposition to the Westernized disconnection and compartmentalized style of leadership found within many Westernized colonial education systems

today, as suggested by House, Javidan, Hanges & Dorfman (2002).

Our Indigenous educational leaders within the Western colonized educational system are trying to find a balance within the system so that they can be true to who they are as Indigenous people, yet still align with the system in which they are working. The theories of House, Javidan & Dorfman (2002) about leadership behaviours and attributes outline intersections where this tension and conflict exist. One of their findings speaks to how leaders change their leadership styles to 'fit in' to the dominant culture within the organization. They also make connections between social and cultural norms dictating what leadership should look like within an organization.

The question emerges as to how Indigenous leaders can meet the challenges of knowing and understanding the Western colonized system that they work in, and still honour and uphold the Indigenous knowledges and understandings related to supporting their community as an Indigenous leader. The differences in leadership theories and styles must be understood by the leader in order to be able to move between both places comfortably, like the frog. The challenge then is how to work as a leader within a Westernized system while maintaining what culturally supports that leader and grounds them as an Indigenous person.

A research study on Indigenous Leadership in First Nations schools by Stockdale, Parsons and Beauchamp (Benham & Murakami-Ramalho 2010 p. 81) built a list of nine highly effective ways in which Indigenous leaders lead effectively in their schools. The nine ways are common traits of strong Indigenous leaders who:

- 1. Foster and nurture a sense of culture and traditions within the school.**
- 2. Take time to really know the community and are comfortable attending community functions; they are trusted within the community.**
- 3. Listen, care, and support the people**

with whom they work on professional and personal matters.

4. Create 'family-based' working and learning environments, both literally and figuratively.

5. Engage in detailed planning and develop procedures that are systematic and sustained, and shared with all staff.

6. Understand the community in which they work, developing a sense of realness about what they do. This understanding includes the impact of historical events, particularly residential schools.

7. Foster hope in their schools, and with everyone associated with the schools.

8. Are passionate and stand for what they believe in, never compromising their goals and vision.

9. Are conceptual and use the 'big picture' as their compass.

(Stockdale, Parsons, & Beauch)

As Brehm & Murakami-Ramalho (2010) state "Indigenous leadership is participatory" (p. 78). Everything that happens within an Indigenous community is intertwined and woven together. As Cajete (2016) Julien, Wright & Zinni (2010) discuss, Indigenous leaders come from strong communities built upon culture, family and history. These communities are wholistic in nature. Leaders are chosen from a young age, and they are then guided by the community around them, to show them how to live and work in a traditional way for the betterment of the whole community, not just themselves (Pointe, S. 2011). This is a key point that is opposite to Western leadership styles that are power-based and controlling. Julien, Wright, & Zinni (2010) discuss Western leadership as an individualistic leadership style that is focused on short-term gains. It is a hierarchical style that

only has the shareholders in mind when making decisions. White, Cooper, & Anwaruddin (2017) found that in this type of leadership style, it is very top down. One person is pushing objectives that possibly not everyone believes. When this happens, leaders can create a culture of mistrust and disconnection. This creates a team of people who are not engaged and fully on board with the leader's vision. Indigenous leadership models differ in their approach: their model is very clear that it is non-hierarchical, and based on what is best for the whole community. All community members have a part to play for the community to be successful. A leader is shown that in order for the good work to be done, they must also do the work, get their own hands dirty, show respect for all people within the community that they are not above them. The leader is walking with the community members on a journey that will benefit everyone. Cajete (2016) talks about the importance of this community and how belonging to it makes a person whole. This connects with what Benham & Murakami-Ramalho (2010) discuss as a wholistic way of being.

"Place is important to Indigenous people because as Indigenous people, we do not believe that only in school is where we learn. We learn from land, sea, and sky, they are fundamentally pedagogical. Place reclaims the idea that valuable learning occurs in multiple ecosystems" (p. 81).

With this in mind, one can see that Indigenous leadership has a rich cultural foundation that ties Indigenous leaders to the land and to cultural history. This creates leaders who have strong connections to their communities, families, and their culture.

As an elementary school Vice-Principal, I have to walk within the two worlds of leadership, like the frog. This is where I struggle as I work within a system that does not always allow me the flexibility and support needed to lead in a true authentic Indigenous way. The dominant thread that resonates throughout all of my research of leadership is that administrators in a school setting are the key for educational change within the

school. White, Cooper, & Anwaruddin (2017) point out that educational leaders are having to shift from the managerial-focused position to include student success within their building. This adds to an already challenging and complex job. This is not a role that is a solo act: it should be a role that all of the team are supporting, and the outcomes for our children should rest on the shoulders of all who work with them.

Within this work as a Vice-Principal, I am the only Indigenous administrator in my school district. This brings up other challenges in how I can lead in an Indigenous way, where I have no supports or other Indigenous leaders to look to for support within the work. Hohepa (2013) states, "Educational leadership has been identified as a key factor in raising achievement particularly among Indigenous and minoritized students" (p. 623). Therefore, if this is what helps build up our Indigenous youth, how do I as an Indigenous person lead our school in a way that is authentic to who I am, while still trying to follow the guidelines of what is laid out for me?

One of the biggest obstacles that I come across within the Westernized school system is the comment, 'We have always done it this way.' This does not mean it is the right way. When I challenge the status quo, this causes discomfort amongst my colleagues who can be truly stuck in doing things the way they have always been done.

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Hohepa (2013) also talks about the difficulties Indigenous people have within the educational institutions:

"The educational institutions seldom reflect Indigenous peoples "cultural purity" and plurality in any traditional shape or form, or wholehearted

embracement of the new world. Education should not be an either/or choice with respect to Indigenous people access to their own cultural knowledge or indeed world knowledge forms" (p. 623).

Indigeneity is what grounds me as a person, who I am, and what I hold true from my ancestors. Within the school, I want to feel that authentically being who I am will be respected and honoured. Julien, Wright, & Zinni (2010) state that Indigenous leadership is grounded in what has come before us, and it is always looking forward toward what it entails for our future generations. Our decisions come from the solid teachings from our ancestors, knowing that they have walked this walk before, and have left us with valuable teachings to share with the next generations. Pointe (2011) makes some great connections about leadership from his mother's teaching, "in order for me to be a good leader, I must be a good follower" (p.5). He also talks about knowing himself inside and out, knowing his strengths and weaknesses in order to know how to lead. His mother also taught him the importance of being connected and listening with respect to all teachers who surround you. This is in opposition to what Julien, et al. (2010) examine as Westernized leadership within institutions that focuses more on outcomes, individual importance and plans in the short term, while Indigenous leadership emphasizes being wholistic and relational. This is one of the core differences between the leadership styles of the Westernized and Indigenous systems. My belief as an educational leader is that relationships come first and that as a school we are nurturing and cultivating a family community.

The more I read and research, the more I want to start to reinvent the system I am in. I want to include my culture, my teachings and strong traditions within my work as a leader rather than trying to fit into a place that may not ever change its way of thinking and looking at leadership.

Hohepa (2013) also states: "Putting Indigenous knowledge, culture, and language at the center of Indigenous education leadership is important, so that emotional and moral energy related to identity may be harnessed to enhance Indigenous student



learning more generally” (p. 622).

What connects us as Indigenous leaders is our connections to each other, and how we relate to each other as we are all teachers and we are all learners. Everything is always interconnected. This brings me back to the frog story and how the frog moves comfortably between both places, the water and the land. This story helps to illustrate the capacity of all people to grow and change. We as leaders need to be flexible and aware of the people and relationships around us, and to build a strong community so that we all have a safe place to be, not only the children but the people who work for us as well. The common thread within the readings about Indigenous leadership is that:

“Indigenous leaders lead from individual generosity, from a sacred space. They lead because our relations challenge us to make a difference” (Benham & Murakami-Ramvalho 2010, p. 90).

Even though the frog has the capacity to live in two worlds and to go back and forth, it is the water that rejuvenates and ensures the strength and endurance of future generations. In this way, the balance has multiple meanings when it comes to the work of Indigenous leaders and the journey of Indigenous leadership. To affect change, Indigenous leaders need an understanding and recognition of how both perspectives work and are transmitted; once this occurs, only then will true change happen within our educational system.

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