

**A CASE STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS IN SUDBURY  
UNDERSTOOD THROUGH THE ANISHNAABE SEVEN LIFE STAGES**

By

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## ABSTRACT

Colonial violence, multi-generational trauma and systemic racism greatly contribute to the high rate of Indigenous homelessness. This thesis focuses on the experiences of a formerly homeless Indigenous man; his life history is analyzed through an approach informed by teachings on the Anishnaabe seven life stages. The findings show how life events and experiences contributed to homelessness and to recovery. Many years of chronic homelessness came to an end with learning about cultural traditions and access to Elders. With additional supports from some positive mainstream interventions, he overcame barriers and obtained secure housing. The findings suggest the nature of the changes required to end poverty and homelessness among Indigenous populations. This thesis speaks to Indigenous perspectives about success and healthy communities. Organizations can be useful by supporting and assisting Indigenous communities to provide services based on homegrown solutions. Investing in the idea of a healthy community, healthy Elders and healthy families can help to break cycles of multi-generational trauma, internalized oppression, abuse and poverty. Initiatives led by Indigenous people such as Healthy Babies programs, schooling, health care, and child protection can support healing and preserving the culture, but also can create employment, pride, and the opportunity to give back in meaningful ways. Opportunities for communities to have access to healthy foods, recreation and physical activities may also provide young people with positive experiences. Places where youth can play safely and develop their skills are crucial during the Good Life and Fast Life. The factors needed for an urban Aboriginal person to achieve *bimaadiziwin* include involvement with supportive/healthy cultural communities and opportunities to give back in meaningful ways; they can lead to traditional healing, a sense of belonging and personal identity.

Access to such supports should be ensured in childhood. **Keywords:** Anishnaabe seven life stages model, colonial violence, cultural traditions, Indigenous interventions.

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My birth name is Justin Brennan. As a young child, I was part of the mass removal of Indigenous children from their mothers—also known as the '60s-'70s Scoop (see below, Researcher's Role, p. 21-22). I was given the name of Brian Slegers. I am returning to my birth name and the change of name will become official in the near future.

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## INTRODUCTION

This narrative study focuses on the experiences of a formerly homeless Indigenous man; his life history has been analyzed using an Indigenous lens—the Seven Life Stages framework. This lens allows key elements and turning points to be revealed with a focus on those that led him to walk down a particular path of poverty. Although membership in an Indigenous middle class is held, still, by relatively few people, there is an emerging trend indicating that Indigenous people are slowly rising out of poverty. Understanding the life circumstances that keep Indigenous people in poverty can provide new knowledge about what leads them out of poverty. This kind of information can inform social work practice and enable social workers to provide the right supports, at the right times in life, to ensure a good life (*bimaadiziwin*).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

I use the word *bimaadiziwin* instead of *wealthy* or *successful* because wealth and success can mean different things to different people; for example, the Greek word *eudaimonia*, found in Aristotle's work, has been translated into English with varied meanings, such as 'happiness' or 'welfare'. Yet Aristotle explained that he used *eudaimonia* as the term for the highest human good (Jackson, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, *bimaadiziwin* will be taken to mean the 'good life', in which one has food security, autonomy, safety and shelter. Other elements of the good life involve strong cultural, community, and family ties and a lifestyle that recognized the guiding principles of the Seven Grandfather Teachings: knowledge, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth (Benton-Banai, Edward, 2010).

Research findings from workshops conducted with Cree participants from the James Bay region indicated that the individual and collective goals of community members did not centre on an abundance of wealth, the acquisition of material goods or having a large home (McLeod, Hein & Kauppi, 2014). The workshop participants included community members with diverse experiences and backgrounds; they engaged in discussions about current housing issues in the James Bay area. The workshops explored participants' thoughts about their ideal housing design. Members of the research team facilitated different engagement activities that concluded in sketches and drawings of the participants' ideas of optimal housing. In fact, when invited to think about their vision for the future regarding their housing and living circumstances, they expressed hopes that were quite modest, environmentally sustainable and built around strong family ties and cultural practices. These findings suggest that *Bimaadiziwin* is not synonymous with wealth, but instead refers to an ideal developed by Indigenous people that emphasizes community connections.

Homelessness involves a range of living circumstances that impede the good life, such as not having a house or apartment, living on and off the streets, 'couch surfing' or having little to no income. This broad definition of homelessness is based on existing published literature and is also inspired by, and consistent with, descriptions of poverty and success in the *Urban Aboriginal Middle Class Study* (Parriag & Chaulk, 2012) and its predecessor the *Urban Aboriginal Task Force Study* (McCaskill & Fitzmaurice, 2007). The material conditions of homelessness also reflect the displacement and trauma of colonization.

Poverty, for the most part, affected Indigenous peoples after the arrival of European colonizers, who brought with them disease, land displacement and genocide (Durst, 1992). The beliefs and values of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are radically different and often in

conflict. Because Indigenous beliefs place greater emphasis on the needs of the community and less on the separation of self from community, notions of success differ between Indigenous communities and European colonizers. The accumulation of possessions, owning land and material wealth may not be goals or priorities (Durst, 1992). Throughout Indigenous peoples' experiences with colonization, the imposition of European belief systems has made it harder for Indigenous people to access *bimaadiziwin*.

As the Canadian government gradually desisted from forcing Indigenous children into residential schools, the Sixties Scoop emerged as a form of displacement of Indigenous children from their communities and cultures. This term refers to a period between the 1960s and 1980s, when Indigenous children were removed from their communities by child welfare agencies and adopted into non-Indigenous homes. Testimonies of First Nations survivors of the child welfare system, residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, such as those documented in the book *Stolen from Our Embrace* (Fournier & Crey 1997), depict the horrific lived experiences of children who endured colonialism, assimilation and discrimination, inherited legacies of intergenerational trauma and daily challenges in survivors' lives. However, these stories also offer testimony on moments of resiliency, recovery and reconciliation. What we learn from these stories is that Indigenous people and cultures can survive and heal, that recognition of the potential for a better and brighter future is woven into even terrible histories. We can build mutual respect by recognizing differences, addressing gaps and developing new approaches to relating to one another, but for Indigenous communities to realize *bimaadiziwin*, they must also be supported to embrace their own cultural traditions, principles and practices.

In this thesis, I have conducted a narrative analysis of the life of a formerly homeless Indigenous man to better understand the relationship among histories of colonial trauma,

reclamation of Indigenous culture and access to the good life. A goal was to draw upon Smith's (1999) approach to decolonizing research through the application of a culturally appropriate methodology. Based on a series of interviews, I explore an Indigenous man's life history within the Anishinaabe 'Seven Life Stages' framework on human development. Although most commonly shared orally by Elders as part of ceremonial practice and teachings, the Seven Life Stages framework can increasingly be found in web-based discussions and in recent publications.<sup>1</sup>

Like the teaching lodge illustrated in Figure 1 below, one enters the physical world from the East. Following the sun's journey across the sky, individuals journey through the Seven Life Stages towards the sunset, accomplishing growth and change before reaching the West and entering the spiritual world. I selected the teaching lodge for this analogy because it is the place where one acquires the traditional teachings that mark each stage of life. Two things are certain in life: we all entered through the eastern door—as new life—and we will all exit through the western door as our physical being dies and we enter the spirit world. This thesis “walks” the narrative of the participant, Elan<sup>2</sup>, through each stage of life from birth to death to consider the key circumstances that contributed to his life in poverty and on the streets and to his resilience. This may help to identify several turning points in individuals' lives that could lead them to homelessness or lead them to *bimaadiziwin*.

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<sup>1</sup> The teachings of the Elders and traditional people that informed the Best Start Resource Center, 2010 'A Child Becomes Strong: Journeying Through Each Stage of the Life Cycle' will provide the framework for this research ([http://www.beststart.org/resources/hlthy\\_chld\\_dev/pdf/CBS\\_Final\\_K12A.pdf](http://www.beststart.org/resources/hlthy_chld_dev/pdf/CBS_Final_K12A.pdf)). However, complimentary Anishnaabe Life Stages teachings from Elder Lillian Pitawanakwit can be found at: (<http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/transcripts/ojibwe.pdf>), as well as in Kim Anderson's, 2011. 'Live Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine' University of Manitoba Press.

<sup>2</sup> Elan is an Indigenous name and is used as a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and privacy.



Figure 1: Teaching lodge.<sup>3</sup>

Within Indigenous culture, stories and oral histories, typically focus on a place, happening or experience. They teach about how consequences of these factors can affect an individual's life in a negative or positive way. The teaching lodge connects individuals with their traditional stories, teachings and practices in a culturally safe space. Stories provide an outlet for individuals to pass along teachings to assist people in the community to learn from others' experiences and to promote social cohesion (Kovach, 2009; Scott 2003). Understanding the importance of the teaching lodge may build, strengthen and contribute to the movement of cultural revitalization (Scott, 2013). This thesis draws on its significance as we travel with Elan through the Seven Life Stages: The Good Life, The Fast Life, The Wandering/Wondering Life, Truth, Planting/Planning, Doing and, finally, that of the Elder.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://zhaawanart.blogspot.ca/2013/05/stories-from-land-of-crane-and-turtle.html>.

Indigenous traditional knowledge is commonly communicated orally; Elders share sacred principles and practices in this manner. In First Nations communities, the verbal teachings by Elders offer a means for the exchange of vital information between individuals at various stages of their lives. In *The Hollow Tree: Fighting addiction with traditional native healing*, Nabigon explains the importance of traditional teachings for guiding individuals through their lives:

The Grandfathers can be understood in terms of spirit guides who possess all the knowledge of the universe. They are available to everyone. Sometimes they may plant thoughts in our minds to give us direction and guidance. These thoughts always make the utmost sense. Their purpose is to help us in our spiritual evolution. I believe the terms Grandfather and Grandmother were coined eons ago when the traditions were being laid down because they were words that people connected with the wisdom of ages.

(Nabigon, 2006, p.89)

Traditional teachings are provided as a spiritual gift, given by an Elder within a particular cultural context. Elders determine whether the community member is prepared to receive specific teachings, depending on the stage in their life. Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals are increasingly exploring and analysing Indigenous cultural teachings and practices. Traditional Indigenous knowledge is vastly different from the scientific, capitalistic, modern worldview dominating North American and European settler cultures. Through traditional teachings, people are guided to understand “the natural laws of balance” (Mawhiney & Nabigon, 2011, p. 27).

The difference between Indigenous and dominant worldviews may be the reason for non-Indigenous people's growing curiosity about Indigenous teachings. However, some Indigenous people fear that written versions of Indigenous teachings may be misrepresented or exploited by other cultures. In the past, religious groups and governments have referred to Indigenous cultural teachings as evil and have banned traditional practices. Developing a culturally appropriate, ethical and respectful way of writing oral teachings is crucial to ensure a valid representation of the information and "to reflect the system of thought of Aboriginal people and to portray it as a legitimate and valid system that has much to offer" (Dickason, 2000). As Dickason explains, the oral teachings reproduced on paper represent traditional knowledge that has been kept sacred and has been passed down for many generations, making it crucial to avoid incorrect or exploitative reproductions.

Although the understandings of the Seven Life Stages are a set of traditional teachings that have been passed down between generations orally, some printed versions do exist today. Since they constitute a core teaching, printed versions are similar to each other and to the oral version. The example below, adapted from the Best Start Manual (2010) "A Child Becomes Strong: Journeying through Each Stage of the Life Cycle," is consistent with the oral teachings:

## **THE SEVEN LIFE STAGES**

### **The Good Life (Birth to age seven)**

After birth, the first seven years of life are described as the good life. During these first seven years, there are usually Elders, grandmothers, and grandfathers around who support the parents in providing for all of the needs of the child. As the Best Start Manual (2010) states, parenting choices made during this stage have more of an impact than most people realize.

Because this stage is so important the family is often supported by the extended family with mothers and fathers being supported by their mothers and their fathers.” This marks a crucial time in child development.

### **The Fast Life (Ages 7 to 14)**

According to the Best Start Manual (2010), the fast life is from 7 to 14 years. This is when the child is being prepared for his or her 4-day vision quest at the time of puberty. It is a time of celebrating the transition into adulthood. The men look after the boys during their vision quest and the women look after the girls during their berry fast. These rites of passage ceremonies help to nurture confidence and build healthy self-esteem. As young people learn about the changes that are happening within, they also learn about their roles and responsibilities as men and women. After each of their respective fasts, boys are re-introduced to the circle as young men and girls, as young women.

### **The Wandering/Wondering Life (Ages 15 to 21)**

The period beginning around age 15 marks the wandering/wondering years. The Best Start Manual (2010) explains that

this is a time when young people begin to ask questions and challenge ideals and concepts put before them. As they strive to find themselves, this is also known as the Wandering Years. In their travels, young people begin to find their teachers and to gain new experiences. Youth begin to question their life’s purpose. The wandering phase is also called the wondering stage as that is what happens when they make decisions and consider consequences. “I wonder if I did this, what would happen.” The

Wandering/Wondering Years are a time for testing limits and discovering the consequences of behaviors and choices which shape a young person's character.

### **Truth (Ages 21 to 28)**

When a person finishes going through the Wandering/Wondering Life, he or she is guided to the next phase by Elders, teachers, and mentors. The Truth stage is from ages 21 to 28. "During this time," explains the Best Start Manual, "young adults find their true self, gifts, and strengths." They develop their own concepts of life, beliefs, and value systems. They begin to question what their parents taught them and seek information from other sources to verify that this information is true. In this stage, young adults become the teachers to their children.

### **Planting/Planning (Ages 28 to 35)**

The Planting/Planning stage is next. This stage is from ages 28 to 35. During this time in life, people begin to nurture the seeds they have planted throughout life. They ask questions, "What am I going to do with all of this information that I have?" and "How will I accomplish what I want to do?"

### **Doing (Ages 35 to 42)**

After the Planting/Planning stage comes the stage where people fulfill those plans. The Doing stage is where people practice the things that they have learned on this life's journey. This stage is from 35 to 42. This is the time to do one's work, a time to follow through with the Creator's plans for oneself and to fulfill the purposes one was given before she or he came into the world.

## **Elder (Ages 49 and onwards)**

The Elder stage begins at 49. This is the “giving back” stage, in which people gain family, clan, and community responsibilities. When one becomes an Elder, one returns to one’s community and teaches the young ones. People continue the teaching cycle by passing on knowledge to those coming behind. During this time, the physical being dissipates, and the spiritual being grows stronger. As a person comes full circle, she or he is now closer to being the spirit that s/he was at birth. Grandparents are closer to their grandchildren in the circle.

This summary of the Seven Life Stages is adapted from an oral teaching and as such, is not owned by any individual, but the whole Ojibway culture. These teachings are rarely written down and are mostly transferred from Elders or faith keepers to the community. The Best Start Manual captured the essence of the Indigenous practices by honoring the traditional teachings and knowledge directly from First Nation Elders from Ontario. The Seven Life Stages teaching has been shared with me many times throughout my life, passed orally and during traditional gatherings. This teaching was transferred to me most recently by Hector Copagog, a traditional healer and faith keeper. The method he used was oral teaching and drawing the teaching in the sand on the ground.

## **HOMELESSNESS**

### **Relevant Findings from the Published Literature**

In keeping with the scope of this study, the literature for this review has been selected with a focus on the experiences of Indigenous people living in urban settings. The relevant themes that emerged from the literature reviewed provide additional insight regarding urban

Indigenous people and their contemporary struggles. A review of the literature has revealed the following themes:

- Homelessness
- Success
- Education inequity
- Employment inequity
- Worldview, traditions and culture
- Colonial Violence
- Decolonization
- Poverty and Public Policy
- Racism and its impacts
- Health
- Resilience
- Ojibway traditional teachings and practices

Findings from the *Urban Aboriginal Task Force Study* (2007) indicate that poverty and homelessness affect nearly half of the urban Indigenous population in Sudbury, despite the emergence of an Indigenous middle class. Education levels among Indigenous people have risen significantly over the past 25 years, and the expectation was that income levels would reflect this change, but this is not the reality. Many barriers affect the lives of Indigenous people, such as systemic racism in hiring practices, tokenism in jobs, and nepotism among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous employers (*Urban Aboriginal Task Force Study*, 2007). The *Urban Aboriginal Task Force Study* (2010) identified linkages between poverty and high levels of unemployment, decreased income rates and low academic attainment for urban Indigenous individuals. The

urban Indigenous population is often stereotyped, with a negative impact on employment opportunities.

Current issues pertaining to homelessness, poverty, racism and unemployment can be addressed by developing new initiatives that help sustain successful outcomes. The study identified “a need for a coordination of supportive services, including: life skills counseling, transportation, employment counseling, and cultural teaching” (Fitzmaurice & McCaskill, 2007). There is an assumption from a Western perspective and some Indigenous perspectives that being poor or homeless is not acceptable. What is acceptable is earning a good wage, being housed, being a consumer, and acquiring goods and material wealth. Perhaps, for Indigenous people living with poverty, affluence is not their goal. The emphasis on ownership, domination, exploitation, accumulation of material possessions, and individual self-preservation is a Western ideal. Durst (1992) states that, in Indigenous societies, more emphasis is placed on the community and the collective good than on the individual. Indigenous societies are more egalitarian and communitarian than Western agrarian societies (Durst, 1992). For these reasons, Indigenous homelessness needs to be addressed from an Indigenous perspective.

### **Reasons for Homelessness**

Filbert and Flynn (2010) discuss the nature of colonization, oppression, and assimilation as major contributing factors to infant mortality, low school performance, high dropout rates, low income and social disadvantages. Despite these serious threats to development, there are those who persevere. Filbert and Flynn (2010) describe this perseverance as resilience – a positive adaptation in the face of serious threats to development. Filbert and Flynn (2010) investigate this phenomenon by studying the role of personal assets, also known as resources. These are

measurable developmental, cultural, internal, and external characteristics that are thought to predict positive outcomes for individuals. The more developed and defined these assets are, regardless of whether the individual is poor, middle class or affluent, the more successful her or his life outcomes are predicted to be (Filbert and Flynn, 2010).

### **False Dichotomy: housed versus not housed**

Stephens (2009) believes that the rich will become richer and the poor will become poorer over time because the social system is organized to direct wealth, money, and power to the top. But Stephens (2009) argues that this represents not a process of transition, nor a war we can prevent or even fight. Instead, he states that the class war is over. According to Stephens (2009), those who are wealthy, such as corporate elites and those heading multinational corporations, have been victorious—they have already won. This is evident in the great income inequality that exists within Canada and the large proportion of wealth owned by the most affluent 10 percent.

Levin and Herbert (2004) suggest that the huge inequalities and lack of culturally appropriate services in the health care system detract greatly from the success and health of Indigenous people. When services are not culturally appropriate or when they discriminate either overtly or covertly, people are much less likely to access them—even those who urgently need them. High numbers of single parent families, difficulty accessing and maintaining employment, and lack of adequate housing are among the many problems that plague urban Indigenous people (Levin and Herbert, 2004).

The literature seems to paint a bleak future for an Indigenous person who aspires to be “successful” according to the mainstream definition. Given the challenges described above,

Indigenous people may believe that they stand little chance of achieving success in the mainstream of society. Yet, if our belief is that we will not succeed because we have always been poor or we have always been unsuccessful, than this belief may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Conversely, if our belief, our lens, our mindset and our dream are to accomplish our goals—whatever they may be—at least these dreams “put us in the game” and not on the side lines. If we refuse to accept “no” for an answer, if we stand up when we fall or, as Filbert and Flynn (2010) state, we rely on our assets (even our protective ones), we can obtain some measure of success.

If we believe or set certain expectations for ourselves beyond what we have known, perhaps our chances improve. Weigner (2000) states that middle class or poor children set their career expectations when they are young, and their expectations are based on the circumstances to which they are conditioned. For example, a poor child is unlikely to believe in the possibility of becoming a professional, such as a physician or a nurse, but it is expected that a middle class child will have such aspirations. These expectations are based in part on role-modeling by parents and community members. Weigner (2000) suggests that if poor children were to set their goals higher, they would be far more likely to succeed, even if they do not reach the original objective or aspiration.

Other studies support these claims. In *Bridges out of Poverty*, Payne et al. (2009) write that “poverty is relative. If everyone around an individual lives in similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth may be vague. Poverty or wealth exists only in relationship to known quantities or expectations” (Payne, 2003, p. 1). For example, someone might state “[I] didn’t realize we were poor until I saw how other people lived outside of my community.” Durst

(1992) also gives many examples of how the concept of poverty only exists within a construct of poor, middle class, and rich.

However, not all communities embrace this concept and that some economies are not organized according to beliefs based on the notion of individualism. The content of the *Bridges Out of Poverty* program (2009) suggests that people living with poverty can exit the so-called “cycle of poverty,” whether it is generational (two generations or longer) or situational (a shorter time and caused by circumstances). Payne (2009) states that it is quite possible for individuals to make the transition from poverty to the middle class or to affluence, but it may be necessary for them to give up certain relationships, even if only for a limited time.

What precipitates the type of life events that prevent people from living *bimaadiziwin*? Joan Kendall (2001) writes: “[the] causal factors associated with Native underdevelopment are numerous and complex, including loss of land and sovereignty, cultural genocide, lack of education, and job market discrimination” (p.44-45). For Indigenous people in Canada, loss of land and sovereignty and cultural genocide are tragedies that have been re-enacted repeatedly in various forms since the period of ‘First Contact’ in the 11th century (*First Nations in Canada*, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2013). In consultation with local Elders in the Sioux Lookout region, Sider (2005) observes:

Displacement from traditional land was among the first of government policies and practices aimed to assimilate the Anishnaabe people, destroy traditional social structures and take control of lands and resources. Land treaties all across the country were just one means to this end. (sec 4.6)

Sider (2005) also asserts that in addition to this forced displacement, Aboriginal people were also “dispossessed of any natural resources that would later serve to sustain a community” (sec 4.6). Living in remote, isolated areas with limited access to (and/or control of) resources that would generate a healthy economy, many Aboriginal people leave—or have left—their home communities for urban centres in search of employment or education/training opportunities. Data from the 2011 Census shows that 56% of Aboriginal people were living off-reserve in urban areas (INAC, 2016). The move from home communities has not been positive for many individuals, a reality that is reflected in the fact that although only approximately 4% of the Canadian population identifies as Aboriginal, at least 10% of the homeless population is Aboriginal (Sider, 2005, sec 9.1). Indeed, research findings from northeastern Ontario show, homelessness amongst Indigenous people is as high as 28 percent of the homeless population (Kauppi, Pallard & Shaikh, 2015).

With regard to housing, researchers identify a critical lack of recognition in terms of the extent of housing hardship amongst Indigenous people.

[There is a need to recognize] the profound importance of housing as a social determinant of health for Aboriginal Canadians. The necessity to have safe, accessible and affordable housing is paramount in maintaining physical, emotional, and spiritual health. In Canada, Aboriginal peoples are disproportionately affected by poor housing and living conditions. (Bedard, 2013, p. 16-17)

Further, physical relocation is sometimes synonymous with familial and cultural dislocation—a loss that negatively impacts individuals, thereby placing them at a deficit with regard to resilience-promoting resources.

Case studies of homeless and impoverished urban Indigenous people also identify the pervasive impact of intergenerational trauma as a contributing factor in the cycle of poverty. Over the course of the nearly 150 years that residential schools were in existence, Indigenous people were subjected to a cultural genocide at the hands of the Canadian government. Approximately 150 000 Aboriginal children, some as young as 4 years old, were forced to attend residential schools. One part of the horrific legacy of residential schools is that “the children who survived often had low literacy rates and did not have parenting or life skills. Many turned to substances in order to forget the trauma they experienced while attending residential school” (“Why Am I Poor?” Best Start by Health Nexus, 2012). Moreover, a school system that sought to assimilate Aboriginal children “into Euro-Canadian society, actually denied them both a western education and opportunities to learn traditions and ways of subsistence traditional to their families and communities” (Sider, 2005, sec 8.3). In the landmark 2008 “Statement of Apology,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper, on behalf of Canada, stated:

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage, and language. [...] The legacy of Indian Residential Schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today. (June 11th, 2008)

His words were echoed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with the release of the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report” in December 2015, when Trudeau quoted directly from the apology: "The government of Canada sincerely apologizes, and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly" (Public Speech, 2015). Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Commission, acknowledges that although the federal

government has committed to the implementation of all 94 Calls to Action, “Change, of course, will not be immediate. It will take years, perhaps generations” (Public Speech, 2015). Studies on Aboriginal homelessness and poverty affirm the dire need for change as, the reality is, many urban Aboriginal people and families continue to live in conditions and situations that are incommensurate with non-Aboriginal Canadians.

Traditional Ojibway teachings such as The Seven Life Stages show us that the events of specific life stages can significantly affect the direction of one’s life journey. On the quest for *bimaadiziwin*, individuals continuously evolve as they pass through each of the stages, growing and learning as they move towards the fulfillment of their life’s purpose. Inevitably, everyone faces some form of adversity in life, but for some, an interruption, subversion, or eradication of a stage can change the course of that person’s life, leading them down a path that leaves them living with homelessness and/or poverty. For Indigenous children, families, and subsequent generations who were victimized by colonization and its policies, it meant, amongst other things, an erasure of life stages. From birth to age 7, it is intended that a child will live “The Good Life”: a time of substantial growth and development for a child, a time when family and community play a vital role in helping the child to establish strong social and emotional bonds. The stages that follow also emphasize the significance of the family and community in a person’s maturation. A subversion or removal of these influences can be detrimental. A review of some recent studies on homelessness and poverty show that many Indigenous people affected by these situations may have also been impacted by some form of the following: education inequity, employment inequity, systemic racism, decolonization, intergenerational trauma, and/or health concerns. Yet, despite the enormous obstacles they face, their narratives share themes of resilience, success, and empowerment through cultural recognition. Indigenous people repeatedly

demonstrate their remarkable resilience in the research literature (Bedard, 2013; Scott, 2013; Sider, 2005; Taylor, 2014). This indicates that, notwithstanding the adversities they endured, their internal strengths can help to steer them back towards the path to *bimaadiziwin*. Honarine Scott (2015) observes that, “resilience is a dynamic process that is not monolithic; it manifests itself uniquely” (citing Burack et al., 2007; Everall et al., 2006; Ungar, 2008), an understanding that must be reflected in types of support provided. This perception of resilience, as a unique and powerful process, supports the idea that “Aboriginal people can overcome adversity through cultural recovery [...] There is a greater spiritual dimension to this powerful narrative of resilience” (Bedard, 2013, p.74). With regard to its role in recovery and support, recognition of the spiritual dimension of development facilitates a person’s journey through the Seven Life Stages.

## **TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS**

Benton-Benai (1988) explains that teachings about the Seven Fire prophecies outline the grave dangers of greed and consumerism. The Seven Fire Prophecies are guiding pillars of the Anishnaabe people. The seventh prophecy—known as the seventh fire—states that Anishnaabe people will begin to turn to their old ways once again. It is said that settler/colonial society will be given two choices: one choice will be to live in peace with each other and stop the destruction of the earth. If settler/colonial society chooses this path, the eighth and final fire will be lit. The other choice will be to continue to do what they have been doing and to persist with actions that are destructive of the earth. The consequence of choosing this path is that destruction to its people will be magnified tenfold. Anishnaabe people have a high regard the Seventh Fire Prophecy, especially since the six previous prophecies are recognized to have been accurately

predicted. There is a movement among many Indigenous people to return their traditions, to protect the earth and water from corporate greed and to live in a simple way that is more harmonious with the mother earth (Benton-Banai, Edward 2010).

An effective analysis of the life history of an Indigenous person must draw upon decolonizing methods that recognize the traditional wisdom of Indigenous people. Traditional teachings such as the Seven Life Stages and the Seven Fire Prophecies can be helpful as tools for analyzing the narratives of Indigenous people. In current research project, elements of these teachings will be used to explore the life story of an Indigenous man who lived with homelessness and extreme poverty for an extended period of time.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand some of the reasons for poverty and homelessness amongst Indigenous people—by studying a single case—while some secure *bimaadiziwin* or success.

#### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this study, I ask the following key questions:

- How can issues of poverty and homelessness be explored using the Anishnaabe Seven Life Stages?
- What are the primary factors that could lead an urban Indigenous person to homelessness?

- What are the factors that could lead an urban Indigenous person to achieve *bimaadiziwin*?
- How can the lessons from this study be applied to social work and policy change to prevent homelessness in northeastern Ontario?

## METHOD

### RESEARCH DESIGN

In this thesis, homelessness is conceptualized as absolute homelessness (living on the street) as well as near homelessness, which can include the period of transition off the street and into housing while living below the poverty level on the equivalent of an Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP) benefit payment of \$1,110 monthly for a single adult (ISAC, 2015). Poverty is an important theme in this research, and the idea of success in many cultures is closely aligned with material possessions or wealth but many Indigenous cultures reject this idea of success and instead measure *bimaadiziwin* by the strength of a person's character or their path in life. Moreover, material wealth is viewed communally in some Indigenous cultures, and securing *bimaadizwin* means attempting to evenly distribute material "wealth" within the community.

### Researcher's Role

Clarification of bias is a validation strategy that assists readers to understand the researcher's role within the study, as well as to identify the biases or assumptions that could affect the study (Creswell, 2007). In an effort to clarify my own biases, it is necessary to disclose that I feel a personal connection with the research data. I have mixed Mohawk/Ojibway and

French ancestry. As a young child, I was part of the mass removal of Indigenous children from their mothers—also known as the ‘60s-70s Scoop. At 18 months, I was adopted into a Dutch family of farmers who came to Canada to find a better life farming in southern Ontario. I spent my early years immersed in Dutch tradition, culture, and language, and I was a farmer myself. At the age of 15, I set out to find my biological mother and father; at the age of 16, I was successful in finding them. My mother, a very traditional Mohawk woman, embraced our reunion and spent the years afterwards teaching me the traditions of our culture. My father, a residential school survivor, was homeless and suffered from mental health and addiction issues. To this day, he is still homeless. I am still learning how these events have affected my life, my views, struggles, strength and values, both in my success and in challenges. I am also still learning about how these events have affected not only my biological family, but also my adopted family. And not only do I interpret the research data through an Indigenous lens, I also interpret it through the lens of being a victim of the many waves of oppression and cultural genocide inflicted on Indigenous people.

I have a 2-year diploma in Traditional Aboriginal Healing from St. Clair College in Windsor. I have also completed a 4-year Honours degree in Native Human Services, and I am now completing my Master’s degree in social work. Since the year 2000, I was largely a single father of three beautiful children due to their mother’s illness and inability to care for her children. At the same time, I was pursuing my education and working, as well as involving myself in advocacy for fathers’ right to play a valuable, present and important role in their children’s lives. I have worked on the street as a youth outreach worker, for the public health agency in infectious disease prevention, at Health Sciences North as a Crisis Counselor, and for the Center for Addiction and Mental Health as a Training Coordinator for the North East. I have

also worked on a multitude of Indigenous research projects as the research coordinator, including Casino Rama Project, Urban Aboriginal Task Force Study, Toronto Aboriginal Research Project, Urban Aboriginal Middle Class Project. However, my greatest achievement—what I value above all—is that I have been able to live a healthy lifestyle and to persevere despite my many challenges in life. My proudest accomplishment is raising my children with culture, laughter, stability, and warmth, persevering to give them the life they deserve, and thereby breaking the cycle of oppression and multi-generational trauma. Like the participant in this research, the various transitions in my life mark my progress through the Seven Life Stages as an urban Indigenous man to fulfill my quest for *bimaadiziwin*.

## **SETTING**

The original data used in this study was gathered through the participant's ("Elan's") involvement in *Poverty, Homelessness and Migration* (PHM), a multi-year project conducted in northeastern Ontario from 2010 to 2016, and his participation in interviews and digital stories. Using the information obtained through a series of interviews with Elan, I conducted a narrative analysis informed by Indigenous teachings to explore his life story. I used The Seven Life Stages as a guide to understand the influences present throughout Elan's life. For each of the Seven Stages in Elan's life, I mapped the factors influencing him, exploring paths and transition points, in addition to Elan's perspectives on why his life followed the pathways that it did.

The PHM project was a six-year project of the Centre for Research on Social Justice and Policy (CRSJP), which gathered quantitative and qualitative data about the prevalence and circumstances of people experiencing homelessness in northeastern Ontario. As they are a significant part of the population of homeless people, the project included Indigenous people by

using a decolonizing approach and participatory action and feminist research methods. Working collaboratively with 11 communities, project activities were conducted in several Northern cities, towns, First Nations communities, Native Friendship Centers, health and social service agencies, and with homeless people. Information was gathered through individual interviews, focus groups, digital storytelling, photovoice, documentaries and a period prevalence study in several towns and cities in Ontario, including Moosonee. The data helped to generate short- and long-term ways to address gaps in housing services and (potentially) to reduce homelessness. The PHM project also examined the economic, political and social structures that limit the housing, policy and program choices available to Northern communities.

This researcher worked with PHM to analyze qualitative data from the interviews with Elan and the knowledge obtained has the potential to be applied through community events, practical projects and social action. I analyzed the interview data in my home office using my personal laptop computer, which is secure and password protected.

### **Participant**

A critical narrative analysis, guided by traditional teachings on the Seven Life Stages, is appropriate for the focus on Elan's life history. This approach is appropriate as he has contemplated and explained, in interviews, his experiences as an Indigenous person and the role of traditional knowledge and practices in his life.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Instrument/measures (include draft research instrument in Appendix A)**

A set of questions (Appendix A) was used to guide the reading of the interviews.

## **Procedure (data collection)**

The original collection of data utilized a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, digital storytelling and structured interviewing techniques. The data was collected face-to-face by the lead researcher or members of the research team. The data was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Elan was interviewed in various locations, including various street locations, at social service agencies, and at the PHM office.

I analyzed Elan's interview data using a narrative approach, which utilizes the spoken words and interpretation of the participant. Themes pertaining to life stages of development were located in the data, allowing me to explore Elan's early experiences and subsequent life stages. This Seven Life Stages road map shows when and where Elan experienced *bimaadiziwin*, as well as the periods of homelessness and poverty he faced. The map delineates the key factors, age turning points and specific interventions or life circumstances that led him in various directions. Knowing these key components will help inform social work practice about timely, meaningful interventions at the right moments in people's lives to support a good life.

## **Ethical considerations**

The data for this thesis was collected as part of the Poverty, Homelessness and Migration project. Approval from the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB) was received for interviews and digital storytelling. The participant provided consent for his data to be analyzed by graduate students.

The purpose of Laurentian University's Research Ethics Board is to ensure the research is ethical and protects vulnerable populations, that no one is harmed during the research, to mitigate any risks, and to ensure the research benefits the participants. The REB also ensures that

protective measures, such as confidentiality, informed consent and the protection of the data once it is collected, are built in to the research process. The participant was informed that his identity will not be revealed and that the confidentiality of information would be protected.

### **Approach to the analysis of data**

This thesis uses an Indigenous lens to guide the analysis of the data and produce results that are relevant to the Indigenous community. A narrative approach has been applied to locate content and identify themes related to the Seven Life Stages and to describe the path of Elan's journey through life to the present day.

## **RESULTS**

### **THE WONDERING OR WANDERING LIFE, TRUTH, PLANTING/PLANNING, DOING, ELDER**

The results section includes direct quotes from Elan's story, as he told it in multiple interviews over several years. The quotes represent the most consistent narrative Elan describes for each part of his life story. Eight themes have emerged from Elan's narrative, as well as three sub-themes. The graphs below show the main themes, indicating how often Elan refers to the theme as he narrated each of his life stages. The greatest number of times he spoke about a theme is 30, so this is the maximum value on the graphs. In the sections that follow, theme graphs for each life stage take the same format.

Typically, when individuals have a healthy, loving and safe upbringing, they enter a new life stage every 7 years, progressing in a linear fashion. Due to colonization, many individuals' lives are vastly different from healthy upbringings, and individuals may take much longer to

progress to the next life stage. If individuals suffer trauma or their needs are not sufficiently met to allow emotional, mental and spiritual growth, then they may progress in age but not in spiritual, mental and emotional maturity. When people who have been traumatized in the first stage of life, their good life, may be significantly emotionally underdeveloped. Such a person could be 30 years old but emotionally only 5 years old. In the case of Elan, he did not grow in a linear forward motion; in fact at times he regressed. Elan spent a great deal of time in his past life due to the trauma he experienced as a child.

The following themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: abandonment, colonial violence, suicide, culture, abuse, substance use, and unmet basic needs. The themes were analyzed in relation to the Seven Life stages and will provide an understanding of the factors that have influenced Elan's life.

- **Abandonment** – This theme includes being abandoned or neglected as a child by caregivers, such as parents, extended family and care providers in the community such as teachers, healthcare workers, and religious leaders.
- Colonial violence – This theme includes negative experiences with the Children's Aid Society (tactics of child welfare workers related to the "Sixties Scoop"), the church, health care (hospitals), teachers, schools (residential or Indian day school), foster care, and racism.
- Suicide – This theme includes exposure to suicide in the community, friends and family that have completed or attempted suicide, and Elan's thoughts or attempts of suicide.

- Culture – This theme includes cultural teachings, traditions, cultural role models, such as elders or community leaders that have had a positive influence, speaking native language, and subtle cultural influences, such as the day to day living experiences of the Northern Cree.
- Abuse – Various forms of abuse are included in this theme such as sexual abuse, domestic abuse, bullying, child abuse from family members and community.
- Substance use – This theme includes exposure to the use of drugs and alcohol by family members, friends and community members, Elan’s personal use of drugs or alcohol, including selling drugs.
- Unmet basic needs– Unmet needs, including the factors universally required for a fulfilling life, such as survival, security, love and admiration, appreciation and morale. In Elan’s life, several unmet needs were particularly influential, as shown in Box 1.
- Mainstream interventions – This theme includes the positive mainstream interventions that helped Elan. Some interventions had mixed impacts, as Elan reaped some benefits, but he also experienced abuse or colonial violence in the process. For example, Elan speaks of enjoying school at times and about how his successes as a student helped him later in life, but he was also abused when attending these same institutions. Mainstream interventions include non-cultural and non-Indigenous institutions or individuals that had some positive impact on Elan’s life, such as counselors, school, job training and employment, health care, drug and alcohol treatment, justice system, foster care, and churches.

### **Box 1: Basic Unmet Needs**

1. Survival – The fundamental elements that are required to survive such as air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep.
2. Security– The satisfaction of feeling protected from elements, of having safety, order, law, stability, freedom from fear. When safety is absent, then it can influence other components of an individual’s life.
3. Love and admiration –The desire present from the beginning of the Seven Stages of life to feel a connection to others and mutual acceptance. This need includes friendship, intimacy, trust, receiving and giving affection, and love.
4. Appreciation – Being engaged with others in a way that promotes a sense of achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, self-respect and respect from others.
5. Morale – An individual’s realization of their personal potential. They achieve self-fulfillment and seek personal growth and peak experiences.

### **SUB-THEMES**

There are three sub-themes that are interwoven throughout Elan’s life story, and which impacted him positively. The first is humor. Elan uses humor to speak about and cope with trauma, grief, loss, anger and challenges. In contrast, he refers to anger as the “cancer that will kill you.” He states that everyone he knew who lived on the streets was there because of many layers of

trauma and hurt, which manifested as a deep sense of anger towards themselves and the world around them. Elan states

I always ended up laughing at stuff. At the time I thought real serious[ly about it] and then joked about it. It's good medicine, to laugh, [be]cause who's going to listen to a crying idiot all the time? I find that I get more people to laugh with me when I laugh with them. When I cry and they don't cry with me, no, just joking. So it's better to laugh I think. It's good medicine, makes you happy even when you're not.

The use of humor to cope with the most difficult things in life is also embedded in Elan's culture. Nabigon (2006) writes that laughing is a natural way of healing from pain. Elan resembles at many times, the sacred clown (also known as Two Face, Heyoka, Trickster, Fool, The Contrary). Sacred Clown practice and society are very old Indigenous traditions. Elan used humour to comfort himself and others through the hardest of times, demonstrating the many characteristics of the Sacred Clown as the healer, the teacher and the one that does everything in opposites.



Radin, Paul 4

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<sup>4</sup> 1972. *The Trickster. Tales of the Winnebago trickster figure* New York: Schoken Books.

**A second theme is karate.** Elan often refers to his learning and use of karate, stating in his narrative that he has a Black Belt. Elan attributes his ability to survive on the street, and to protect his friends and other vulnerable people, to his karate skills. Elan also refers to the philosophy or teachings of Karate as lessons that he has applied to his own life. Learning karate provided Elan a sense of security when he faced various forms of abuse from people in his life. The use of karate made him feel empowered and contributed to a sense of worth. Elan explains

In school, there was this kid, every time he felt like beating up somebody, he would always pick on me and I was the one that he would beat up after school. I knew I was going to get beaten up anyway and then the OCCC staff introduced us to this karate instructor for us if we wanted to take it. The first quarter of my friends did and then they started dropping off, quitting. I didn't want to quit (be)cause when they first get their white belt, it feels good. Then you get your yellow belt, then your green belt, then your blue belt, now you want your black belt. You know, you want to work, it's a goal thing.

Karate was a skill that served as an outlet for Elan, helping him feel safe and protected.

**A third theme is that of Shkabaywis.** Elan's narrative often explores the role of the Shkabaywis/helper. Throughout his whole life path, Elan has always placed himself in the role of the helper. Nabigon (2012) states that "People, including helpers, need assistance to turn things in better directions. It is incumbent upon helpers to take responsibility and learn as much as possible from all directions, yet always hold this knowledge in the light of traditional guidance" (p. 51). Elan speaks about protecting sex workers, fighting off bullies, teaching skills for survival on the street, providing drugs/alcohol, comforting those in pain, sharing his personal story to help to others, being an AA sponsor, volunteering time to do outreach on the streets, and sharing

what little he has with others. His dream in life is to open a multicultural halfway house with an Aboriginal philosophy, where all colors and races around the medicine wheel are welcome.

These themes emerged throughout the analysis of the interview transcripts in the various life stages. The following sections discuss each of the seven life stages.

## **GOOD LIFE STAGE**

The Good Life quotes demonstrate several of this project's key themes, predominately abandonment and abuse, which were persistent obstacles in Elan's early life. Elan's experiences of the key themes created a deficit in the fundamental needs that are required to reach *bimaadiziwin*.

### **The Good Life (Birth to age seven)**

After birth, the first seven years of life are described in the Seven Life Stages teaching as the "good life." During these first seven years there are usually Elders, grandmothers, and grandfathers present, who support the parents in providing for all of the needs of the child. This marks a critically important time in child development. Abandonment was a dominant theme in Elan's narratives.

### ***Abandonment***

Elan's statements about abandonment indicate the continuous disconnect he endured throughout the good life stage. In this stage, a child should receive support and guidance from loved ones which would assist the transition into the subsequent stage. However, he described numerous instances of feeling abandoned during his early years.

Everything that happened, with that brother and my parents, what they did to me, I always wanted to die. I didn't want to be here anymore, even as a kid I wanted to go away.

I always believed I was unwanted as a kid, as a baby. I was abused so, you know, I even believed one time I was something that's been broken, it's not worth it. I believed that for a long time about myself because of what happened.

I've been abused, I have been an abuser all my life with my relationships, now starting to find it's because of the abandonment issues and rejection I got as a kid, with all the foster homes, my parents, my mom, my sister, you know? I am starting to find out it stems from there.

Elan describes the pain of abandonment being so intense that he wanted to die or disappear. Elan began to believe in the stage of the good life that he was unwanted. He believed he was broken and worthless, and he carried this core belief about himself for many years of his life. Elan has insight that the abuse, rejection and abandonment that he suffered while in his good life stage formed his behaviour as an adult, and he repeated some of the behaviour by becoming an abuser himself. The good life stage for Elan was lacking in the security, love, nurturing, and comfort a small child needs to develop a healthy sense of self in the years to come.

### ***Colonial violence***

Elan encountered high levels of colonial violence, which are reflected in the following quotes. He was a victim of assimilation by churches, Indian day schools, child welfare authorities and boarding homes:

Back then it was all hush hush, you don't talk about the church like that eh, even my mom. She grew up in there, but she told me not to talk about what happened, don't tell anybody, it'll get me in trouble.

No there was never anybody I could talk to, even the person I went to later on in life molested me after, when I, that was in another school, that's it. Earlier than that, after that incident with priest, [earlier] than that public school, Indian day school they called it. That's where that girl [young woman teacher] did that.

But it started with CAS [Children's Aid Society], and they just naturally turned me over to the boarding homes.

Elan was taught in the good life stage about bad secrets and shame. He describes being abused by the adults he tried to confide in. He explained that he was abused by both female and male adults in school and in the church. These experiences taught Elan that those he should trust would later come to do great harm to him. He was exposed to the blanket of denial and secrecy that accompanied abuse by authority figures. He describes how the CAS was instrumental in perpetuating the abuse instead of protecting him from it which is synonymous with the 60s scoop legacy.

Elan learned in his formative years that he could not trust people, even people who are in positions of trust and authority. This experience would help shape his view of the world around him and his relationships with family, friends and authority figures.

## *Suicide*

Even as a child, Elan experienced suicidal thoughts, which were exacerbated by the effects of abandonment, abuse, and colonial violence: “I started being suicidal early, like very early in life, as a baby I didn’t want to live.”

As far back as Elan can remember, he recalls not wanting to live. This is a tragic memory, since an individual should be able to remember fond memories as a child. Elan carries this emptiness—a void, a deep sense of loneliness—throughout his life. The belief he held as an adult that his life was worthless, and his feeling that he did not care if he lived or died, stem from his good life stage and are carried on through all stages of his life.

## *Drugs and Alcohol*

Elan states that he was exposed to drugs and alcohol throughout his life. The exposure to substance abuse by his parents and siblings affected his own experiences with addictions. He used drugs and alcohol as a mechanism to cope with the abuse and abandonment that he was subjected to at an early age:

I was just a really bad dude. I liked my weed, drinking, acid was pretty big time, and I liked my trips. Ever since I was a kid; one time my parents were partying, drinking wine, I would steal just to get the feeling.

There’s more sniffing back then on the res. I never did that, I smelled it a little, I was more into weed, well ever since I was a kid. I was never into sniffing gas and all that.

The early exposure to substances continued into later stages of his life.

## *Abuse*

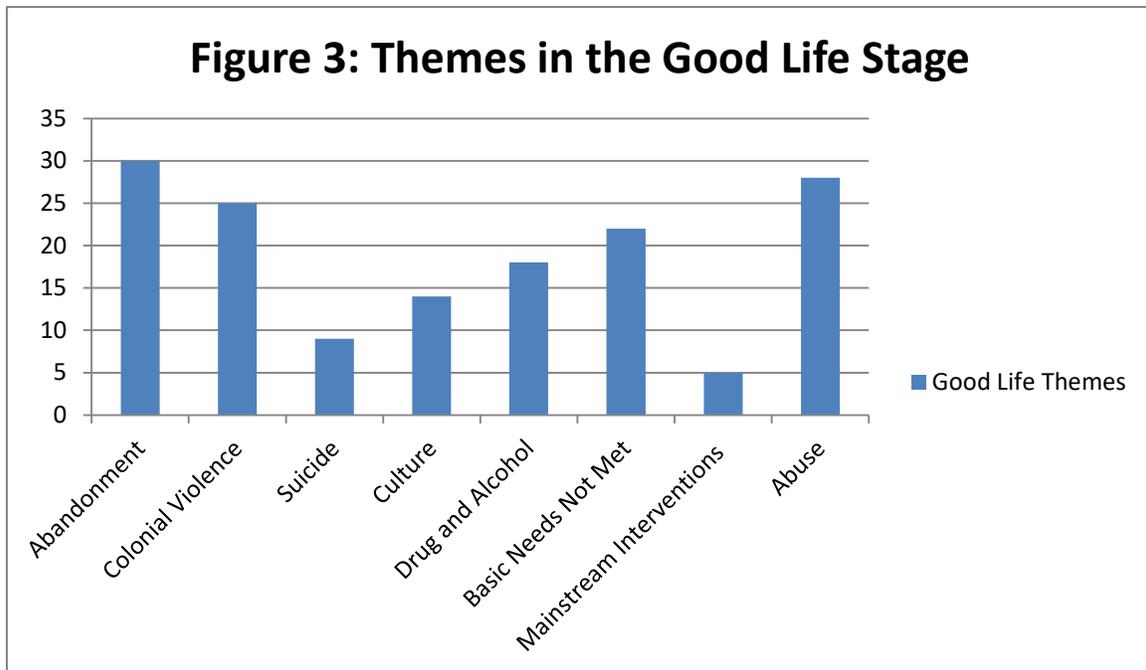
Abuse was consistent throughout Elan's good life stage. His statements tell of the different forms of abuse that he experienced, perpetrated by various individuals in his life. The outcomes of the abuse by his father, priest and school teacher were compounded by colonial violence, abandonment, and basic needs not being met.

Yeah, that was the school teacher. I told her what happened, and she ended up abusing me.

Coming from a family as chaotic as mine, hush hush was everything. I guess especially when it comes to CAS and them moseying around. I learned to be secretive about things that happened, like my mom beating up my dad, she was always beating one of us up.

I used to believe that my parents would kill me, beating me up. I ended telling that to my dad one time "just kill me now, quit torturing you know, just kill me".

Elan experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse as a child in his good life stage. Both men and women in authority sexually abused him. There was no one he could tell. He told his female teacher, and she began abusing him. He was told not to tell CAS, for fear he would be removed from the home and face an even harder life of more abuse and uncertainty. Elan was sworn to silence and suffered quietly, since he had no one to help him and no one he could trust,. He described the abuse from his father and recalls telling his dad just to kill him to end the torture and pain. Feeling like one would choose to die rather than experience more pain is a very difficult experience for anyone at any life stage, but especially for a child. This is a choice no human being, least of all a child, should be forced to make.



According to Elan’s narrative, in the first 7 years of life, he suffered a great deal of abandonment from his immediate family. Elan also suffered at great deal of colonial violence and abuse from nuns, the local priest and teachers at the Indian Day School. Both male and female adults physically and sexually abused Elan throughout his childhood. Elan speaks about his exposure to drugs and alcohol abuse by his family and extended family.

In addition to these difficulties, he also shared positive experiences that he has also had with his father out on the land, and with his mother. He spoke about learning cultural traditions from his father, however his mother was greatly influenced by Christian religious authorities in the residential school that she attended. Elan also explained that the “Indian Day school” he attended provided some positive experiences, along with the bad ones. Elan enjoyed learning and did well in school.

During the first 7 years of Elan's life, his basic needs were often unmet. He discussed being poor, not having a bed or his own room to sleep in, as well as limited food in the home. Elan also states that his needs as a child were neglected, and he was taught not to cry or show emotion, or his father would beat him. He was also taught to not talk about the sexual abuse that he was experiencing from the nuns, the priest and the teachers at school.

These formative years affected Elan throughout his life's journey. Elan later developed substance use disorders related to drugs and alcohol. Elan states many times that he felt like he did not belong anywhere, did not fit in and was an outcast. He developed mistrust for women, leading to dysfunctional relationships, fear of abandonment and domestic violence. Elan also stated that he had a poor image of himself, referring to himself as bad, or unwanted and defective. It is clear that in his first stage of life, colonial violence played a large role in the trauma and poverty he suffered. Elan's parents were residential school survivors and had been told that their Indigenous culture was evil, so Elan's mother rejected the traditional Indigenous culture. Elan's parents also lost the cultural ways of parenting and continued the trauma they experienced in the residential schools within their own family. The multi-generational trauma led to the experiences of abandonment and abuse Elan suffered as a child. Elan also missed out on learning much of his traditions, although he did retain his language. These experiences set the tone for the rest of Elan's life, via his beliefs about the world and himself.

#### **FAST LIFE STAGE (AGES 7 TO 14)**

The themes that are present in Elan's Fast Life stage demonstrate that there was a steady incline in colonial violence, abuse and the use of drugs and alcohol. The fast life is from 7 to 14 years. According to traditional practices, this is when the child is being prepared for his or her 4-

day vision quest at the time of puberty. It is a time of celebrating the transition into adulthood. The men look after the boys during their vision quest, and the women look after the girls during their berry fast. These rites-of-passage ceremonies help to nurture confidence and build healthy self-esteem. As young people learn about the changes that are happening within their bodies, they also learn about their roles and responsibilities as men and women. After each of their respective fasts, boys are re-introduced to the circle as young men, and girls as young women.

### *Abandonment*

Issues relating to abandonment were still persistent throughout Elan's transition into the Fast life stage. He identifies the lack of support and direction that he received from his family and foster care. Elan's statements demonstrate a relationship between his unmet basic needs and his feelings of neglect:

My mom told me she never held me when I was born. I never had that bond with my mother. My mother was a residential school survivor. I never really felt like I had a place at my mom's and dad's, like I said, I was always on a couch or on a floor. I say that was my first bedroom in grade 9, but it was not worth it, I wanted my family, not my own bedroom.

When I was in high school, they put me in a foster home with all the other kids [from the same community], but I was taken right away to another home. It was more private, I guess. I don't know, it was more like boarding homes, those things. There was a whole twenty kids in one little house. I went through so many homes, eh, during that four-, five-year period. I feel like I've been homeless since I left grade eight, you know, and I heard

from another foster place I was “get him out of here, he’s a fucking lost cause” you know.

Elan, like many other children from his community, had to leave his home community to attend high school far away, since they did not have a high school at home. While Elan was attending high school, he stayed in boarding homes and fosters homes. Elan describes CAS placing him in some of these homes. He describes the homes as being over-crowded, however he had a bedroom, which he did not have when he lived at home. Elan states that when he began staying in boarding homes, this was his first time feeling homeless. He says that he wanted his family more than anything else.

Elan explains that the feeling of abandonment and rejection was further reinforced in the boarding homes, since he was often kicked out or moved around. He recalls being told that he was a lost cause. Elan also said that he had never established a bond with his mother, that she had never held him. He believes that this stems from his mother’s experience at residential school. Elan’s experience of abandonment continues from his good life stage into his fast life. The message from those around him had been clear and consistent: you are not wanted; you are not loved; you are broken; you are a lost cause; you don’t belong here; nobody wants you.

### ***Colonial violence***

In speaking about colonial violence, Elan indicates that the racism and discrimination he endured in foster homes and the education system had serious repercussions. Elan experienced food insecurity and forms of assimilation throughout his fast life stage:

Oh yeah, I didn't last long in most houses. And some of the non-Natives would just take the Native kids, just not feed us properly, and just spend the money elsewhere with their family.

The Cree boys all got along with the Oji-Cree's, but we didn't get along with the French and the English, and we would clash all the time. Back then it was just gangs, right? We got along as Natives, we did; we helped each other. There would be fights on the weekends, Natives against anybody that wanted to take us on, crazy. Racism, there's a lot of that, especially over full plane-loads of Native kids, right? Especially in school and after school, just because you're native, you know?

I started grade nine in '77, and they put us in these homes where the parents were exaggerating everything: how to flush a toilet, cleaning this, turning a faucet on, things I've seen before, you know. I was born in a town with running water. (laughs) But to the kids [from my community], I guess it was all new.

We would get depressed. We wanted to go home, especially with the other kids because of the culture shock. It was a culture shock from going from a packed little house to a spacey one bedroom on your own, you know? It fades, then you start feeling homesick, I guess. Some kids would just cry. Crying was out of the question for me. I never cried then. I didn't know how to, or I felt like I wasn't supposed to.

Elan describes many instances throughout his past life in which he had experienced overt racism and various forms of colonial violence. He remembers not being treated very well in the boarding homes, and non-Native kids receiving better treatment. Elan said he experienced fighting over race: the Native kids against the non-Native kids. He remembers his Native

roommates being depressed, crying and homesick. Elan said he could not cry he did not know how since he has been taught to hold back his emotions and suffer in silence.

### *Suicide*

Due to the challenges of abandonment and abuse, Elan felt insignificant, which resulted in him wanting to end his life. I selected the following quotes because they demonstrate how his familial situation and the environment at school influenced his suicidal thoughts and attempts during the fast life stage:

Even back in high school, there were deaths, there were suicides among our students.

Pretty much all through my young life, I was suicidal. I got the scars to prove that I've been through it. I always wanted to die...

Everything that happened, with that brother, my parents, and what they did to me, I always wanted to die. I didn't want to be here anymore. Even as a kid, I wanted to go away, it's weird.

Elan stated that during his fast life, while away at boarding schools, he remembers some of his peers committing suicide. He was suicidal throughout his whole fast life and had attempted suicide on several occasions. Elan describes the scars on his body as a testimony of how hard life was and how he always wanted to die rather than experience that pain. Elan shares openly the immense pain and ongoing suffering caused by the abuse that began when he was a child and which continued well into his fast life.

## ***Culture***

Elan speaks of a few Indigenous cultural influences to which he was exposed during his fast life:

They used to give elders tobacco for a good voyage home.

Yeah, it was scary when you're in the freighter canoe, and you don't see land, and it's nothing but waves.

There was this one Elder that had a little shop for coffee and donuts and cake, and she would take us in there and serve my brothers and sisters for free.

Elan shares memories of distinct cultural experiences during his fast life. Although his mother was a residential school survivor and therefore rejected the culture, Elan remembers giving tobacco to the Elders, traveling by freighter canoes and the kindness of some of the Elders in his community. These experiences offered Elan some hope and value in an existence that had very little of either.

## ***Drug and Alcohol***

Substance misuse was a significant issue at this point in Elan's life. He began using drugs and alcohol recreationally, as a coping mechanism to suppress the emotions he felt in response to colonial violence, abuse, abandonment and suicide:

I started smoking weed in high school because all the other kids did. The other students were crying because they missed their parents, and I chose to smoke weed because I didn't want to feel homesick. I would get kicked out of there, 'cause I was drinking.

So I was a loner, I guess, in my way of thinking through life. Even at thirteen years old, everybody else was in their beds crying, I would sneak out and go have a joint and sit there, just go away, you know? I was just a really bad dude. I liked my weed and drinking, acid was pretty big that time, and I liked my trips. Like I said, I got into acid, bigger and better stuff. I didn't use counselors back then, didn't want to talk to anybody.

Elan spoke about using drugs and alcohol to deal with the loneliness and homesickness. He began to use harder drugs over time, as well as alcohol, which led to him to being kicked out of school and some of the boarding homes he was in. He recalls using drugs as early as 13 years old, and he never wanted to get help to deal with his challenges. He did not want to talk to anybody. In Elan's good life, he was taught to keep problems secret, and when he did reach out for help he was abused by those helpers. He coped with his pain by using drugs and avoiding help, as well as the potential for more pain.

### ***Unmet basic needs***

Elan's narrative demonstrates that his basic needs relating to food and shelter were unmet during the fast life stage. He explained that unmet basic needs led to other negative outcomes for him and for other children his age:

That's why everybody was moved away, eh, there was no high school in [my hometown]. A lot of us died there, eh? Kids froze, killed themselves. Outside drinking, they froze to death.

I would tell on them, cause one family, all they did was take the money and ask our parents to send us goose and ducks [to eat]. And they would feed us that all through the year, with lunch and that, and they would have their supper, like steak and whatever.

They would call us after for our soup and sandwiches, so I told on him. They were just using that money. They weren't properly taking care of us, you know, and we'd eat whatever we stole from the garbage dump, right.

Elan described how moving away for high school was very hard on the young people. He stated that there were many deaths from accidentally freezing to death, drinking and suicide. He explained that the boarding homes were corrupt, and the foster parents did not spend the money sent for the care of the Indigenous children on proper food or shelter. He states that the children had to go without. Elan learned to scavenge for food as a way to survive by looking in the garbage dump. Once again, authority figures entrusted to meet Elan's basic needs did not do so. These unmet needs reinforced in his fast life the lesson Elan learned in his good life, that he could not trust those who were supposed to care for him.

### *Mainstream interventions*

Some of the interventions that were applied in Elan's fast life stage included a counsellor, curfews and improved living conditions. However, Elan stated these interventions were limited, even though he was at a crucial period in his life:

I had a good counselor I guess—an Indigenous woman who was my counselor [from my community].

I was always grounded, all through grade 11 and 12. I was always bad. I wouldn't be home for curfew, or I'd be full of hickies, coming out of the basement with my girlfriend or some stupid stuff, anything, I guess, that'd get me grounded for weeks on end.

About four of us to a room, six of us to a room, it's dorm like, and I got along cause I know the boys from [my community]. They've come from a big family, they like, they're used to that chaotic living condition. I guess that's how we got along, cause we're used to living compact, and I stayed there for a year. Again I stayed for the summer and paid for my rent and didn't want to go home.

Elan describes both positive and negative experiences with mainstream interventions in his fast life. He remembers having one good counselor, and he remembers having rules and structure in some of his boarding homes. He stated that not all his experiences in the boarding homes were bad. For example, he remembers getting along well in one boarding home with some other boys from his home community. He says he stayed there over the summer because he did not want to go home that year.

### *Abuse*

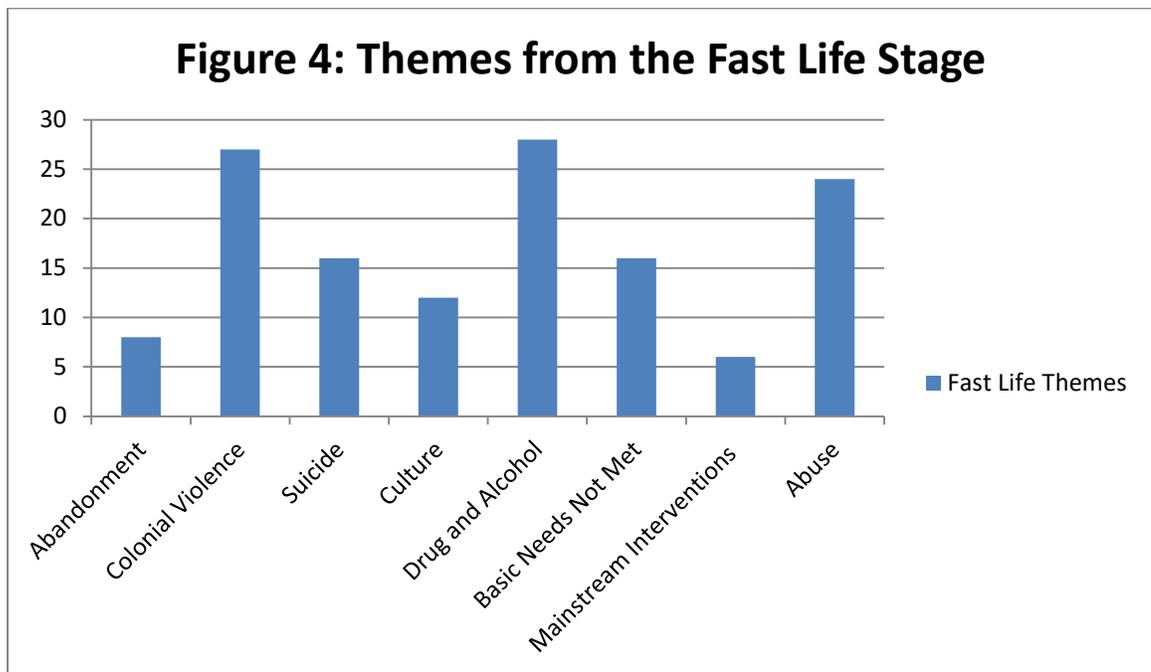
Elan experienced significant abuse from foster homes, boarding schools, students and female teachers. Elan explains that he was persecuted for speaking his traditional language, demonstrating the parallels between abuse and the manifestation of colonial violence.

In one boarding home. I tried to seduce my foster mom. It worked, she went for it , it's crazy... I could write a whole book about sexual abuse, what happened to me, seems like sometimes.

Kids would beat me up at recess, even my own cousin, because I spoke my mom's language. Plus the other student was abusing me too, like taking my money. They would get me to ask my mom for money and then wait for me at the post office and then take the money, stuff like that, same grade.

Yeah, there was some sexual abuse going on in high school, too. Well, I don't know if you'd call it rape, but what do you call that, seduction I guess? Well, I was fourteen I think, by another lady so....

Elan's comment that he could write a book about the sexual abuse he experienced as an adolescent is revealing. He describes how older women took advantage of him—an abuse of power. Adults are in positions of power over children and youth in their care. Elan describes how his own peers also bullied him and beat him up, for speaking his language or for his money. Elan experienced a very challenging fast life with no healthy, consistent or positive adults to help teach him, support him, guide him and protect his vulnerabilities.



It is evident that Elan experienced more colonial violence in his fast life stage, through racism, many foster care homes, and discrimination at school. Elan states that foster mothers and female teachers continued to sexually abuse him. Elan explained that this is when he began to

feel homeless; he was very lonely and had suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. He maintained the belief that he was bad, and because people told him he was a lost cause, he began to believe it. He was homesick, and so were the other children who had to leave their communities to attend high school. He states that some of his friends committed suicide.

Through the analysis of frequency of mention of themes in his interviews (i.e., by counting the number of times Elan references each theme in his interviews) it is evident that, as Elan experienced more colonial violence, he used more drugs and alcohol to cope. Suicide was an issue in that some of his peers chose to commit suicide, and Elan also wanted to die. Elan states that some of his foster care homes were nice, and it was the first time he had his own room or bed, however despite these luxuries, he still suffered a great deal of trauma at the hands of the foster parents. He expresses that he was often kicked out of homes, grounded or shown “tough love.” Elan had little exposure to his culture during his fast life stage and minimal mainstream interventions. The mainstream interventions that did help Elan, such as education, karate and some minimal counseling, often came with a personal toll. For example, he was bullied and sexually abused at school until he learned karate. After Elan learned karate, other schoolmates looked up to him for protection, which led to a lot of fighting. While he did find some counselling helpful, it was brief.

With minimal cultural and family support, Elan felt a sense of loss, loneliness and feeling of not belonging during his fast life. His experiences reinforced his beliefs about himself and the world that he was no good, did not belong and had little hope for a better life, and that nobody wanted him. Elan just wanted to die. His extreme alcohol and drug abuse allowed him to feel a sense of belonging, since he could share this with his peers and later deal drugs, which made him popular and needed by others. Using substances also helped Elan cope with his homesickness

and pain. In his fast life stage, Elan began to believe that society had no place for him, and he was angry about what society had offered him so far. He began to think that living on the streets, with all the other wounded, angry and lonely people, was where he fit in.

## **WONDERING LIFE STAGE**

In Elan's wandering/wondering life, the challenges he experienced because of colonial violence, abuse and abandonment affected his ability to meet his basic needs. Due to his struggles with poverty and homelessness, Elan's comments about this stage of his life show a greater frequency of the themes of substance use and unmet basic needs.

### **The Wandering/Wondering Life (Ages 15 to 21)**

The period beginning around age 15 is described as the wandering/wondering years. This is a time when young people begin to ask questions and challenge the ideals and concepts put before them. As they strive to find themselves, the teaching conveys the view that they are wandering. In their travels, young people begin to find their teachers and to gain new experiences. Youth begin to question their life's purpose. The wandering phase is also called the wondering stage, as that is what happens when youth make decisions and consider consequences: "I wonder if I did this, what would happen." It is a time for testing limits and discovering the consequences to behaviors and choices which shape a young person's character.

### ***Abandonment***

Elan's experiences of abandonment show a variety of circumstances that contributed to his experiences of other themes throughout the wandering/wondering life stage. Elan began to

question his purpose in life because he felt unwanted, lost and irrelevant to the individuals who were supposed to be his teachers and guide him throughout this life stage.

So much that nobody wanted me around anymore, cause that's all I was, a user. I drifted all over. After that, I just wanted to be free, eh.

You know when you get lost. It's been normal for me in my life. Jail here. I think jail saved my life quite a few times.

I think I was 20 when I went out west. Well, I asked my mom if I could go. She said "go ask your dad." I think I was only 19, right after high school...I asked my mom if I could go out west, and she said "well, scat," so I just went to sit in the kitchen for five minutes, and then I went back to mom, and I said "yeah, dad said yes." That's how I did that. My mom was blind, eh. She couldn't walk around, so I had to run around for her, so I did. I said can I take my welfare check, and she said "well, ask dad for some money," and that was the time I left her. How's that for some nice way?" "Hey dad, uh I'm leaving, I'm going to Manitoba to visit, I'm going out west" I told him, "and mom asked me to ask you for money like cigarette money or something (chuckles) give me a smoke." He gave me two bucks. (laughs) Anyway that's how I left. He ended up giving me two hundred bucks because I ratted him out, eh, for being cheap.

Elan speaks to abandonment in his wandering/wondering life, starting right after high school. He felt like no one wanted him around anymore, as if he was a user. He stated that he left, and he just wanted to be free. This was the first time he left home for good. He asked his parents for some money and went to Manitoba. During this life stage Elan experiences jail for

the first time. He explained that jail became a normal way of life for him and feels that it saved his life at times by providing him food, shelter, structure, sobriety and safety to some extent.

### *Colonial violence*

Colonial violence was an ongoing issue in Elan's life, particularly when he was living on the streets. He noted that the criminal justice system facilitated a range of forms of colonial violence by police officers and inmates:

You see, they kicked me out of my reserve one time, eh. Pretty much got kicked out of everywhere. Even in the city, I'm judged. City limits. I got kicked out. The police drove me out and told me not to come back.

1.

[I experienced] not being able to get out of prison for a misdemeanor charge because I'm homeless. They would keep me in jail and remand me, and remand me because I was homeless. I don't have an address out here. This is not very different than any other jail you go to. It's full hatred and a lot of stabbing, we don't hear about out here, and shootings, a lot of killing back then, but I heard it's worse now because of the gangs. A hierarchy, survival of the fittest. If you can take anybody, everybody, in your range of eighteen guys, you own that range. Or say you you're in for murder, right there you're on top of that shit pile. If you're in for rape, you're in the bottom, you don't even matter, if you're in for child molesting, or some other sick thing, you don't matter. You're in the bottom of the shit pile.

I have family everywhere. It's a big city, earth decides who eliminate, we're coming up from down to take over. Even your bible says, the meek shall inherit the earth, doesn't it? Go figure, maybe it's true.

Elan speaks about being “kicked out” of his own community because of his behaviour. He believes he was forced out of almost everywhere he went, even cities. Elan recalls on occasion police driving him to the city limits and telling him not to come back. This illegal, dangerous behavior on the part of police officers resulted in the death of an Indigenous youth—Neil Stonechild—in Saskatchewan (Wright, 2004).

Nevertheless, Elan explained that prison, at times, gave him shelter, and since he had no place to return to, the system kept him in jail longer. Elan describes prison as a brutal environment, governed by survival of the fittest. He states that he was exposed to a great deal of violence in there, and one had to be violent to survive. He expresses some pride about being resilient and able to survive.

Elan states that being an Indigenous man, both in prison and on the streets, is dangerous. You need to be tough in the prison. On the streets, one has to be cautious around everyone, even the police, who engaged in behaviours such as “starlight or moonlight tours” which led to the deaths of Indigenous people in Saskatchewan (Wright, 2004). In his wandering/wondering life, Elan became a drifter, not wanted anywhere.

### ***Culture***

Although he often felt like he did not belong, culture was still an important part of Elan's life:

If uh, it was only the uh Native brotherhood, it's a Native brotherhood its, there's a bunch of drummers and pow wow people. They believe in the, uh, peaceful way of doing things.

During Elan's description of his wandering/wondering life, he did not speak about his culture much. But he did discuss the Native brotherhood on the streets and in the prison, where he was able to establish a family for mutual protection and support. This type of family is also discussed in books about the establishment of the notorious Indigenous gang, the Indian Posse gang, such as "*The Ballad of Danny Wolfe*".

### ***Drugs and Alcohol***

During this time in Elan's life, his substance use disorder was severe, and it contributed to his inability to meet his basic needs. It compounded difficulties associated with his experiences of homelessness, poverty, poor mental and physical health and absent familial support:

We lived in a bottle. Nothing else mattered. Nothing, even our babies, mom, wives, dads. Just that. We are all in that little self-pity group, I guess we called it. We called it "men without wives club." But there were girls in it too, eh. We travelled as family. That's how we survived. We even kill each other as family. I've seen that here, too, in the city. That's sad, eh...I taught karate. Nobody believes me till they see it. I'm like a wino Bruce Lee when I fight.

We pass out in our blankets in there because no one was touching my bottle, and no one was touching his, so we stayed awake for each other. I was on morphine. It was the chemicals, I got involved with the drug trade there, like running back and forth to Brandon and Winnipeg. I used to push cocaine for them, for the Italian dealers. Like any

other mule, you get hurt, you get shot in the head. You know, they'll take your load off and leave you. Same concept, you know. I knew the consequences. I partied everywhere. And London, and the sugar shack here, sugar shack Thunder Bay, Winnipeg underground, after hour bars. I could see a sign, yes, I lived there, I was family.

We slept under the bridges, camp, but then there was a lot of life. Oh, I miss stragglers from the hippy days. They like to travel, right, the older hippy days? That's who I started hanging around with, 'cause they like their pot. Physically, I was always skinny, so I was always drinking and drugging around so I didn't care.

Elan clearly demonstrates that drugs and alcohol became a focal point in his life at this time. He states that he was using all kinds of drugs, and he was very thin as a result. He dealt drugs, acted as a mule and became involved in organized crime. Elan refers to his ability to use karate as a form of self-defense. Elan describes how he had learned karate as a child, that it helped him to survive on the streets and also taught him self-discipline. Elan refers to the street family that looked out for each other, yet even killed each other if they had to. At this stage in his life, Elan was indulging in drugs and alcohol, both to survive on the street and to cope with being on the street.

### ***Unmet basic needs***

Elan's basic needs were profoundly unfulfilled during this part of his life. His struggles with homelessness and poverty show the steady decline in his access to the things necessary for his survival. His sense of security, safety and belonging were non-existent throughout his time on the streets.

What's on top of me? How many blankets do you got on me? "It's called snow, you ass, get up," I said. So I kick him, eh. I kicked the lump of snow. and he starts shaking and gets up. The cops were shitting their pants by now. You know One of them were trying to write the report, you know, it's crazy. You've camped, rough camping, I mean, without all the special things, without the fire and nice blankets, minus the luxuries. You were never homeless as long as you got a jacket on, and you're good to go, eh? That's what my dad used to tell me. You're never homeless in the bush. You got a jacket on, you're good to go.

We always had camp spots, and there was always boxes of food, left over from the other "campers", and they still do the same thing I find. When I went down south, I seen a box full of food under a bridge, and I went to check, sure enough there was food in there. So for travelers, it's a place, warm, it's out of the rain, so...I started hanging out around homeless people, and they would teach me the ropes, where to sleep, where it's safe, where it's not, who to stay away from.

We were on the streets cause we didn't care if we lived or not. Then we found out later that we really want to live. Homelessness is an exhausting life. You can't go to sleep unless you're passed out. There is no real rest though. It's very tiring, that life. You don't sleep well. You're full of bed bugs, and you just get out of your clothes, jump into a lake, get new clothes, get new clothes, that's how we used to do, get rid of them.

Elan spoke about having very few possessions and earned the name "Coyote" on the street because he was able to sleep under the snow to stay warm. Even though his basic needs were not met,, there was still a street etiquette: it was customary leave food behind, under a

bridge, for another traveler. He describes being homeless as exhausting, since you can never truly sleep, however there is a sense of freedom. Elan said that his father taught him that as long as you have a jacket, you have a home. "Home is where the heart is," so to speak. During this stage of Elan's life, he seems to have been somewhat at peace with, or accepting of, the fact that he was homeless and living that lifestyle. He often speaks of homelessness as not being all bad. There were some positives too, such as the brotherhood, freedom, his street family, and the experience of being animus.

### *Mainstream interventions*

Throughout the wandering/wondering life stage, jail had a significant impact on Elan's life, providing the time to reflect and recover. The criminal justice system was a form of intervention for him at this point in his life:

Jail helped with that. Oh yeah, you think a lot about your life in jail, you reflect. That helped, you know. Especially when I came out. I snapped out of it sort of thing. Being in the hole was like a vision quest. It's crazy.

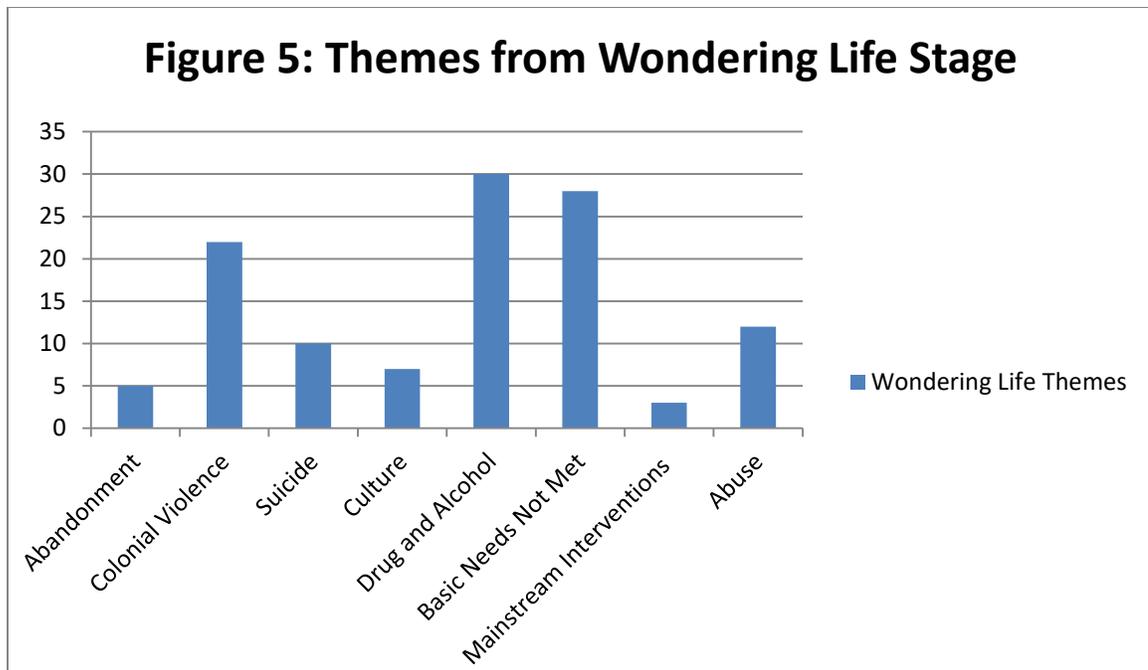
Elan describes prison as being something that helped him to get off the street, be sober for a while and reflect. He does share that prison was also brutal and a hard place to be; Elan had both good and bad experiences there. He stated that being in solitary confinement was like a fast or a vision quest for him, where he had experienced spiritual enlightenment, healing and insight about himself. He also stated that being in "the hole" was a very difficult experience.

## *Abuse*

Elan experienced less abuse in his wandering/wondering life stage than he had in earlier stages of his life. However, what he does say about abuse displays how homelessness and substance abuse could result in negative interactions with law enforcement.

They had me handcuffed and threw me out and kicked the shit out of me, so I pretended to get knocked out when they kicked me in the head, eh. I just wanted those cops off me because I, so I could run. And so [they said] “Oh let’s have a smoke, take the cuffs off him before he starts, you know, bloating up. We’ll finish him off later,”.

Elan describes being abused by authorities again during his wandering/wondering life. He states that the police beat him up or picked him up and dropped him off outside the city, in the middle of nowhere. During this stage of Elan’s life, it is clear that he experienced more abuse from the system, the police, the prison and the services that should have been there to help him, than from family, or his street family and friends.



After returning home from high school for a visit, Elan decided to leave his community and began hitch hiking and learning the ways of the street. Elan stated that he met other homeless people who taught him their ways, and he began to use more drugs and alcohol. Elan speaks extensively about partying, fighting and traveling during this time of his life. He lived most of his wandering/wondering life on the streets with most of his needs never being met. Elan was in and out of jail and thinks that jail may have saved his life at times. The wandering/wondering life is when Elan learned the most about street life and met his street family. Elan states that he did not care about his life at this time. He gave up on it and did not want to live, so he did not care what happened to him.

Elan experienced a great deal of colonial violence from police, the jails, detox, health care and the mainstream systems that were in place, supposedly to help him. He states that he was “kicked out” of many places, and banned so that they would no longer try to help him. He

maintained the belief that he did not fit in, and no one wanted him around. The frequency of the key themes in Elan's narrative show a relationship between higher rates of colonial violence, Elan's increased substance use, and his needs going unmet. Even though Elan experienced less abandonment and abuse during this part of his life, the frequent colonial violence, combined with limited exposure to his cultural and few mainstream interventions, pushed him into deeper despair. Homeless, exhausted, and without food, shelter, comfort or safety, he had little hope and stopped caring about his life. His main goals were to remain intoxicated and to look after and protect his street family.

Elan spent more than seven years of his life wandering and wondering. In fact, he spent most of his adult life in this stage. Elan did have periods in which he was able to live a stable life for a time. At one point, he was married and had children. He had a job as a police officer in his community. However, his life fell apart after his wife had an affair. Elan was very angry and hurt about the affair and wanted to seek revenge. Elan's mother asked him to leave the community, as she was worried that he may harm others. Elan left and returned to the streets, back to his wandering/wondering life, where he stayed for roughly 20 years.

### **TRUTH LIFE STAGE**

Elan began his transition into the truth life stage when he began to develop emotionally and learned important lessons. However, his progression into this stage was impeded by the continuation of problems he faced during his wandering/wondering life, including colonial violence, abuse, unmet needs and limited exposure to culture and traditions:

## **Truth (Ages 21 to 28)**

When a person finishes going through the wandering/wondering life, Elders, teachers, and mentors guide him or her to the next phase. The *truth* stage is from ages 21 to 28. During this time, young adults find their true self, gifts, and strengths. They develop their own concepts of life, beliefs, and value systems. They begin to question what their parents taught them and seek information from other sources to verify what they learned to be true. In this stage, young adults become the teachers to their children.

## ***Colonial Violence***

Elan's time in jail and his treatment by the criminal justice system exposed him to further colonial violence. He questioned his values and beliefs while he was subjected to solitary confinement:

I went insane in the hole so many times, I lost touch with reality. I couldn't differ from reality to fantasy world. I hallucinated a lot because they deprived me of sleep at night, and I just went crazy, I was crazy. I tell people that god cleansed my insanity with insanity, but I found myself in the hole too eh, 7 months in.

Being in the hole had a calming effect on me because of the nightmare I went through. It helped me, especially the crosses the other inmates started buying because we would talk through the slots. You could see a couple of doors down the other side, and people would come in and out, pretty well doing short time, like two three weeks, you know? Me, I was a lifer in the hole. That's all there was to it. That's how I introduced myself: "I'm a lifer down here."

Elan describes the cruelty he suffered, being in solitary confinement in prison for seven months. He described himself as a “lifer in the hole”. He felt that he lost his sanity because the prison guards would not allow him to sleep, and he was hallucinating. Despite laws regulating when and how long prisoners can be placed in solitary confinement, and the conditions of this form of incarceration, Elan was placed in there for seven months. This treatment amounts to cruel and unusual punishment. Even though he describes this as a terrible experience, he nevertheless believes God cleansed his soul while he was in there. He was begging to see the truth of his life and the truth within himself.

### *Culture*

Even though Elan was struggling throughout this period in his life, Elan still practiced his traditional teachings:

I made crosses and dream catchers, knotting and braiding I learned as a kid from some old hippies I met way back while I was in prison.

I used to meet with the elder when I was in prison for help and teachings, but I would also try and steal tobacco off of him. When I got out of prison I continued to see the elder and began working with him and helping him.

Elan states that while he was in jail he began making Indigenous crafts, which he has continued to do as a creative outlet. He found this to be therapeutic, and he sold some of his artwork. Elan began to learn about his culture in prison by meeting with the Indigenous Elder on staff there, on a regular basis. This provided a reintroduction to his identity, and he began embracing his culture again during this stage of his life.

### *Substance use*

Drugs still had a significant impact on Elan while he was in jail and after he was released from jail. In his interviews, Elan discusses the effects and consequences of his substance abuse:

He [an inmate] puts a joint under his door. By the time the guards get there and through all the doors, it's down the toilet. I get stripped searched, and I get roughed up a bit, but I don't care. I'll be high for a couple of hours right?

So I moved to the bush. Got a hold of some morphine, and yup. I was a morphine addict.

Elan was able to access drugs in prison, even though there was great risk in doing so. He used drugs less in prison than on the outside, since he spent a great deal of time in solitary confinement. However, when Elan left prison, he returned to using morphine for a while, before getting clean again.

### *Unmet basic needs*

Elan still remembers how he felt in solitary confinement, when his basic needs were not being met:

It was just a little taste of what I was going through for the next fourteen months, you know, that's what it was like. That's just a little cut of what I went through for the first seven months of my, uh, in the hole there, my time in [prison].

For the seven months that Elan spent in solitary confinement, only his needs for food and shelter were met.

### *Mainstream interventions*

Even though there were many issues that arose from his time in solitary confinement, Elan recognizes that he spent the time transitioning into the man he is today.

When they broke my ribs in [prison], I knew I wasn't seeing a doctor then. I was there, I thought I was going to die there because I was way, it's like this, the holes like this in [prison], on the ground, eh? And I was way in the back where the walls were wet, went to work, you know, that's where I did my transformation, I guess you can call that.

Elan describes that he thought he was going to die in the hole, and they refused to give him access to medical treatment after they had broken his ribs. He repeatedly describes his incarceration in solitary confinement as both very cruel and difficult. Yet, it was a place that facilitated a life transition, similar to how a vision quest or a fast would have done.

### *Abuse*

Elan's belief and value systems were distorted by the struggles he experienced in previous life stages. In interviews, Elan identifies a relationship between the abuse he endured as a child and the abuse he inflicted, in his own relationships, as an adult. While he was in prison, he reflected on that relationship:

Five, six years ago I was charged with wife assault or spousal abuse, and I was given a six month sentence, and I do admit I did hit her, yes I did, and what I did was wrong, right? But something happened inside when I was in there. See I was such an angry person, and I just wanted to fight and hurt people all the time in there, so I did something stupid and hurt some people when I was inside the prison. I used a shank I made to slice

somebody's throat and then stab another person, so thrown in the hole, that's how I stayed in the hole there forever. They like to kill me, you know, the inmates, I found out.

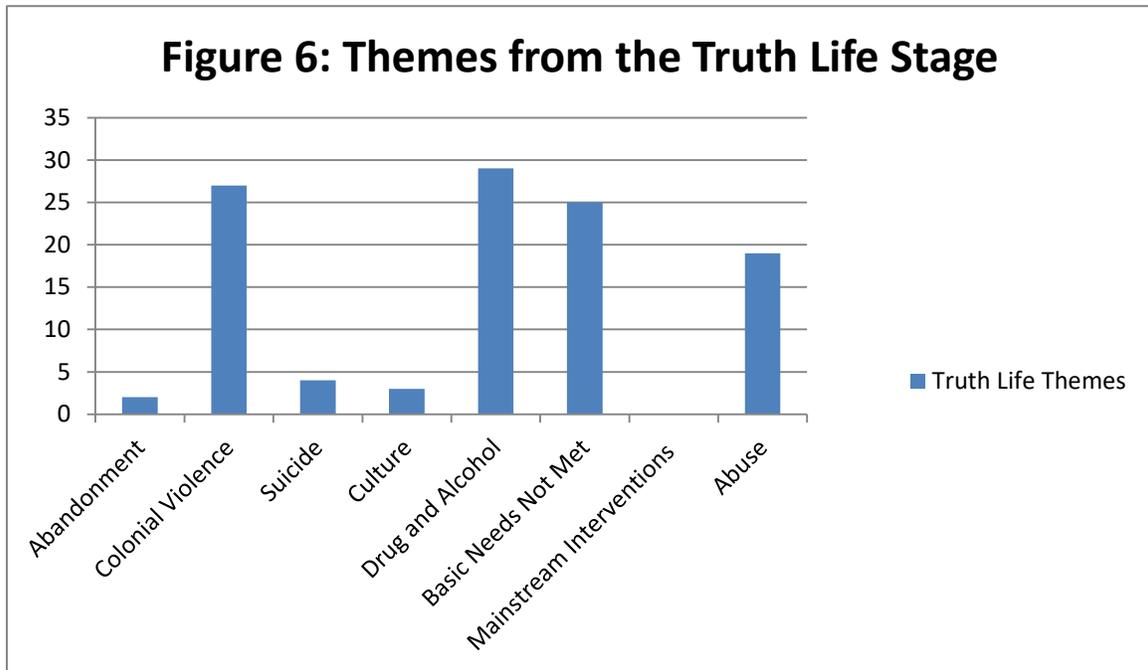
I thought I was safer with the guards, but no, it was worse for me. They threw me in the hole and physically, they beat me up, mentally and physically abused me, kept me awake for days. They wouldn't let me, they didn't let me sleep. They deprived me of sleep for days, so it was worse for me then. I don't know where I belonged then, so I stayed down there, they kept me in there, for seven and a half months. So then I did some blood tests, managed to get through a doctor, and they gave me my blood test, and they found out I had hep C, so the beatings stopped. I had a weapon so they couldn't touch me, then they shipped me over to the super jail.

I was very abusive towards my wife, my girlfriends. I didn't know how to be a boyfriend, a partner.

Elan admits that he was abusive in his relationships with women and realizes that this is wrong. This was an experience of truth, in which Elan saw his behaviour and took responsibility for it. He admits that he has learned throughout his life how to be an abuser. He admits that he did not know how to be a boyfriend or a partner. In admitting these faults, Elan began to gain insight into his life and his own behaviour.

Elan states that the guards in the prison were very abusive towards him and beat him up. However, when he was diagnosed with Hepatitis C, the beatings stopped—he had become a biological weapon. Elan shares that while at first he thought he would be safer with the guards than with the inmates, he ended up unsure of where, if anywhere, he could feel safe Even in

Elan's truth life, he was still experiencing abuse from people in positions of power, whose jobs were purportedly to protect him.



Later in Elan's life, he began to learn the truth about life. He began to learn some important lessons that would precipitate change. Because Elan often progressed and regressed during his adult life, there is overlap among his wandering/wondering, truth and planting/planning life stages. This inability to grow, to follow the natural life progression, is common among those who have suffered trauma in their good life. A person can be physically an adult, but emotionally they may still be functioning at an adolescent level. In mainstream, evidence-based practice, this phenomenon is sometimes called the "inner child." The seven life stages teaching says that individuals cannot truly progress forward until they have healed the trauma and nurtured the wounded inner child.

## **PLANTING/PLANNING LIFE STAGE**

This stage of Elan's life displayed various intervals of change, and he began to integrate mainstream interventions into his life. He showed progress in establishing relationships and securing employment. However, he still struggled with abandonment and drug and alcohol misuse throughout the planting/planning stage.

### **Planting/Planning (Ages 28 to 35)**

The planting or planning stage is from ages 28 to 35. During this time, people begin to nurture the seeds they have planted throughout life, thus far. They ask questions: "What am I going to do with all of this information that I have?" and "How will I accomplish what I want to do?"

### ***Abandonment***

Elan's planting/planning life stage was impacted by tragic events. He experienced abandonment by his wife and family members, and he experienced the death of his child. He also took on the role of the abandoner, leaving his wife and one of his sons behind.

My mom told me to leave. Well she was having an affair. I wanted to kill both of them. I was saying, if you wanted to do any murdering, [Elan], just kill yourself in this life. Walk away. Thank god I did that, you know. But it is all good now. I forgave them, but they never forgave themselves. I was just talking to [them] about that. [They're] all mad and drunk all the time. Anyway, they are just doing their own thing.

I went there because my daughter died of leukemia, right. That's misery. Her poor [little body]. Everything was coming out in tubes and black guck. You know what I mean? It smelled like burnt coffee.

I left when my son was six months old. I told my wife I was getting a pack of smokes, and that's the truth. I told her don't wait up for me. I am going out for a pack of smokes. I do not smoke. She never listened anyway. People think it's the funniest shit, but it's true. Just ask her. Eight years later, I call her from Edmonton.

Elan speaks about how his wife had an affair. Elan was deeply hurt by this, experiencing it as a betrayal and abandonment by his wife. Worried Elan would kill his wife his mother asked him to leave the community. Elan decided that if we has going to kill anyone, it should be himself. He was also unable to raise his son. He left home and did not contact his ex-wife until eight years later. Later, Elan also lost a daughter to cancer. Elan experienced a great deal of loss and pain in this period of his life. His resilience helped him to survive and cope through this difficult time.

### ***Culture***

Elan indicates that he was reintroducing cultural influences into his life at this time. He began to dream about changing his life, and he integrated symbols of his culture into his goals.

Thank god, I thought I was the only one. That was starting to be weird there. My dream is to have a house here in the city, especially this city, I want to have a house, maybe a way from that jail, for inmates. I will have the four colors there, and that won't mean Natives only, either. I will have that sign. I want to get all the inmates, white, yellow, red, or black.

Now inhabiting his planting/planning life, Elan was making his plans for the future, in which he wanted to create a transition home for inmates, where people of all cultures would be welcome to stay and recover. He describes this as a dream of helping people and giving to the community.

### ***Suicide***

Elan's life was affected by suicide once again after the loss of his daughter.

When my daughter died, and my girlfriend committed suicide after. She stabbed herself. Well, I got one daughter that's eight[years old] here. Her mom died in 2001. Three hours before I got out. She got drunk, she fell back, swallowed her tongue and choked. You know what I mean? She's eight. She doesn't know me. I see her. She's in a foster home.

Elan speaks about how suicide is a constant presence in his life. The mother of his daughter completed suicided, and he lost the baby she was carrying. The mother of his eight-year-old daughter also died while intoxicated, and as a result this daughter is in foster care. Elan is not yet ready to meet her. Even in the planting/planning stage of Elan's life, when he was beginning to get his life together, he was affected by traumatic deaths and losses of the people closest to him.

### ***Substance Use***

During Elan's planting/planning life stage, he began to seriously reflect on his alcohol addiction.

Make them happy with booze. Yeah,. I lived through it, and I was an alcoholic, I didn't give a— you know. The best deal, the best party, goes to the best, goes to the deal.

As someone who has lived through addiction and is now in a stage of recovery, Elan is able to look back on his drug and alcohol use and to identify times when his life began to slowly change for the better.

### ***Unmet basic needs***

Elan was still experiencing unmet basic needs due to his transience, homeless and unpredictable lifestyle. The dangers inherent to living on the street limited his ability to meet basic needs:

Sleep under snow. Get hit by cars, get shot, get stabbed. I know god has something planned. I know this is what it is, you know. Why am I with you girls now?

Elan refers to his faith in god and his hope that god's plan will lead to a brighter future. For Elan, participating in the interview (the "girls" he refers to are the interviewers) might be part of that plan, a sign that things will get better.

### ***Mainstream interventions***

During this time, Elan's use of mainstream interventions increased significantly. The interventions included stable employment opportunities and building stronger relationships with family and friends.

I started as a labourer, then a carpenter. I already knew how to do house wiring from high school. I went to a vocational school, right. You did all the shops there in order to graduate. Anyway. Yeah, that's how I got that job. I moved up. Then there was an opening for housing coordinator, so I grabbed it, and I got it. Oh yeah. I had a good friend with housing and housing inspector. I even took a course, housing inspecting course, in

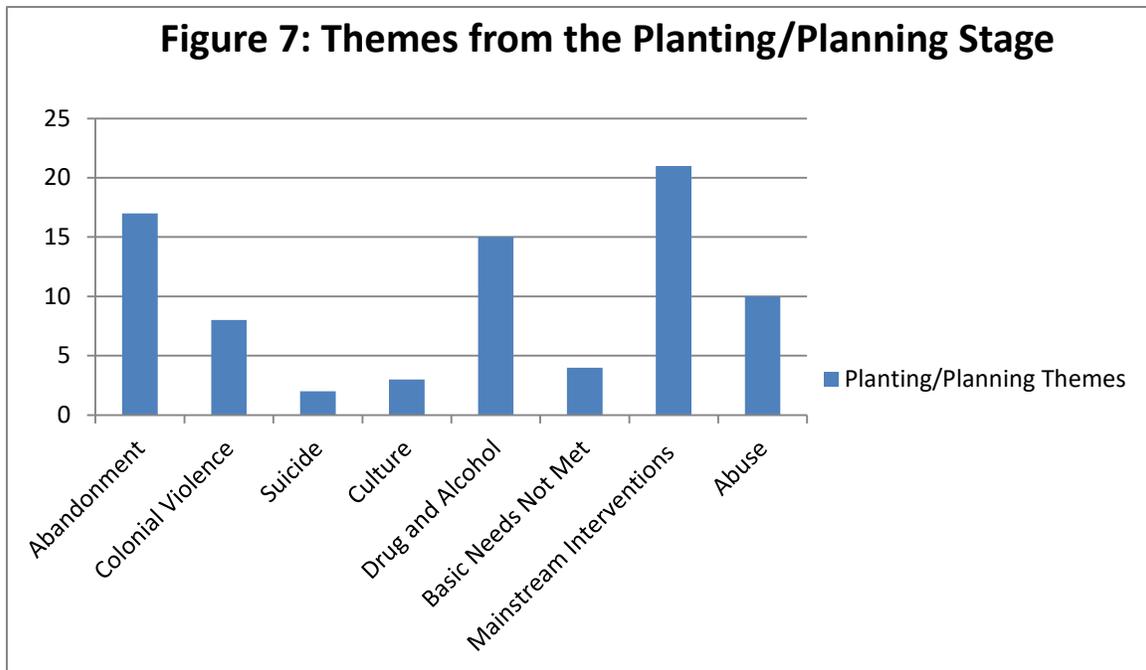
that year. Just to know what it really is all about, and I did learn all about. Pretty much all my friends are in high places.

I was happy to be away from my wife. I didn't take my problems to work. I was so joyful at work, So that's how I got that one. I was a builder. I was like fifteen houses a year.

It's all about business, right. I didn't have any say. I was just a housing manager. Band administrator was there.

Oh after I got out of that jail, I got married. Oh, I am still married to that girl. I keep forgetting. It was twenty seven years ago. With her is four, I have four kids with her, three girls and a boy. My son is joining the army this summer. He is 6'4.

You're just having fun. You don't want to pull your parachute. My very first time skydiving, I didn't pull it. He said deploy, deploy. I said no because I was high on adrenaline. I didn't want to, I wanted it to last. I'm a junkie ,right. A recovering junkie.



Elan describes work in mainstream society as something that taught him skills and gave him a sense of pride. He had several jobs throughout his life, and he attended various mainstream training programs that assisted him in developing skills and getting a job. Elan also has found a new joy in skydiving: a form of getting high without doing drugs. He admits that this is similar to the high of drug abuse and shares that he likes it because he is a recovering junkie. Elan stated that there have been some more positive mainstream interventions in his planting/planning life than in his previous life stages.

Elan had periods of time in his life in which he attempted to have a family and pursue a career. These were relatively short times that occurred in his fast life, wondering/wandering life and truth life. Elan's moments of stability, planting and planning were often derailed when he experienced abandonment by close family, friends and partners. These experiences of abandonment often sent him back to the streets, and back to the street family, with whom he felt a sense of belonging. During times of stability, Elan experienced less colonial violence and

more positive mainstream interventions, such as employment, training, housing and income. Elan's substance use also appears to have been reduced during periods in which he experienced less colonial violence and more positive mainstream interventions, employment and a sense of belonging in his family.

## **THE DOING LIFE STAGE**

During Elan's doing life stage, he indicates that he has achieved stability by immersing himself in his culture and accessing mainstream interventions. Meanwhile, there has been a drastic reduction in Elan's experiences of abandonment and in his substance use.

### **Doing (Ages 35 to 42)**

After the planting/planning stage comes the stage where people fulfill those plans. The *Doing* stage is when people practice all those things that they have learned on this life's journey. This stage is from age 35 to age 42. This is the time to do one's work, a time to follow through with the Creator's plans for them and to fulfill the purpose they were given before they came into the world.

### ***Colonial violence***

Although Elan was incorporating mainstream interventions in his life, he still encountered struggles relating to colonial violence, often related to his past alcoholism and homelessness.

Even to the new detox, I'm still not allowed in there. I'm an outreach worker. I can't go in there. In taking a chance going on that block, cuz that's where I beat up five cruisers of cops. The last time I was out.

Elan refers to how he changed his life and was now sober. He was now helping the community by volunteering to do outreach on the streets. He states that the Detox service still would not allow him in the building, despite the fact that he had recovered and changed his ways.

### *Culture*

The doing life stage was an important period of Elan's life, in which he accessed Indigenous cultural practices and teachings. He engaged in meaningful practices and processes, such as creating traditional artwork and using sweat lodges.

I was selling my artwork to, one of your professors. The Cree girl. She probably still has my artwork. I did artwork for a lot of years. Well, it's a gift, and I keep on doing it. To see my house, it looks like a hoarder lives there, but it's all art material. Art tools and everything.

The transition house I wanted to start would be an awesome program for inmates that are just getting out. For men and ladies, you know. I want to build it like a long house, yeah.

I don't know how to explain all that, you know. There are some things that happened to me in the sweat lodge and other ceremonies that I don't talk about. I don't know how to explain them.

I don't have it in me to be a parent. I love kids. I just don't know how to take care of them. It's like trapping. I'd be trapping myself. You know.

Elan describes how in his doing life he continued to engage in his artwork and now maintained a home where he collected material for his art practice. Elan explains that he has sold

his art to people in the community, who still have it to this day. He reflects again on his desire to open a transition house for inmates that all races and genders would be welcome to attend. Elan shares that cultural healing ceremonies were instrumental in helping him, however he cannot explain how spiritual healing works. Despite already having children of his own, Elan believes he would be unable to care for children and would be trapping himself by trying. Elan is clearly demonstrating his growth in this stage, through his desire to take responsibility, heal himself and to give to his community.

### ***Drugs and Alcohol***

During this period, Elan quit drinking and using substances entirely.

I quit drinking needless to say that year [2004].

Yeah I met her through the Friendship Centre. When I first sobered up actually.

Elan states that in 2004 he quit drinking and began his life of sobriety, after many years of using drugs and alcohol. He explained that a woman that he met at the Friendship Centre helped him to achieve sobriety and to maintain it.

### ***Mainstream interventions***

During Elan's doing life stage, he used services such as treatment programs and detox for recovery. Elan's employment opportunities were expanded as they had been during an earlier time when he was hired first as a guard and then as an auxiliary OPP constable and finally a full constable.

I got into the OPP, when I got married, I was on probation. And I had to do community hours. The only place I could think of that easy work was the cop shop. Just clean their

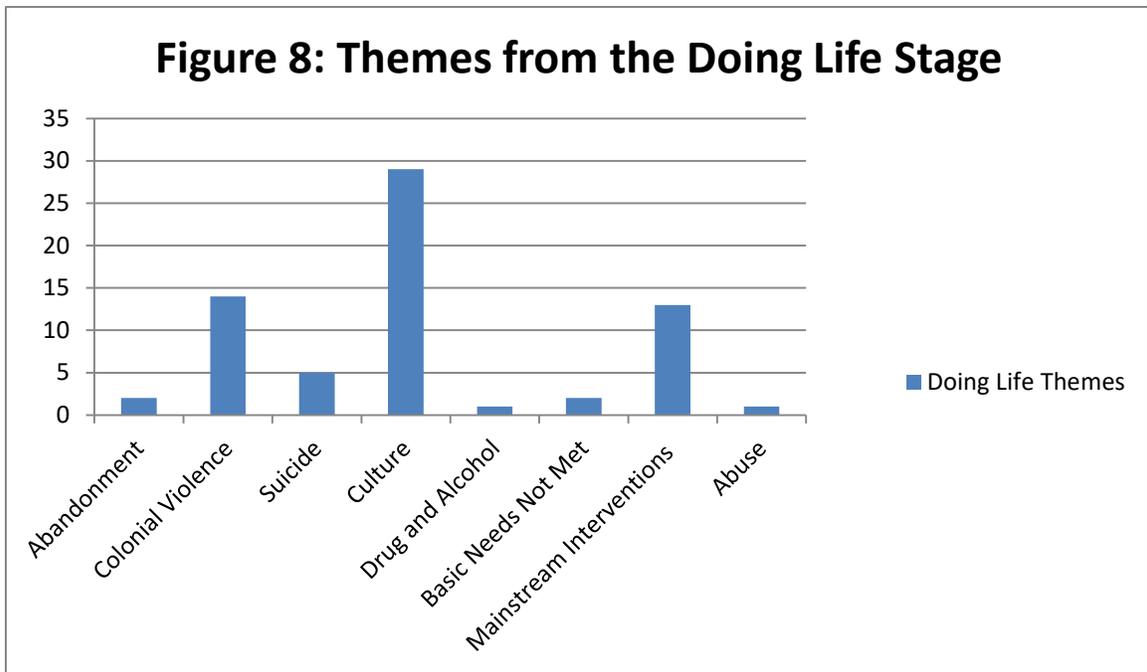
offices and what not, right. And that's what I did. For about six months. Then they said, Elan, we need a guard. Like tonight, right now. Can you guard? Fifteen bucks an hour. Fill me in, so I started guarding for them. I did that. And I was a bodybuilder, too. I was pretty big boy. Then the OPP would come, and the Native OPP wouldn't be in town. Just call Elan if you need backup, the auxiliary. That's how I got to be an auxiliary constable for two years. You know. I worked for them. Then I got hired as a full constable.

They can't just get thrown out, they don't want to, some of them don't want to go to treatment, or jail was treatment enough for most of us.

But what I meant by that is nothing bad, is just detox, it's a great detox place for us. You come back all healthy. There is no rehab, like any other place out here, too, there's no rehab unless you want it. Same as jail. There is rehab in jail. Not enough programs, though.

I've only been computer literate for a year and a half, no twenty-two months, no. A year and a half. I was computer stupid.

Elan explained that Detox had helped him at times to become sober. He stated that jail was a good rehab program. During this stage of life, Elan began learning how to use a computer. He speaks about a time when he was a constable in his community. That gave him a sense of pride and helped him to stay sober during that period of time.



Elan entered his doing life in 2004 when he quit drinking. Elan stated that during his time in prison he spent many months in the “hole,” where he experienced some self-realizations. He states that while he was in solitary confinement, he visions, and spirits would visit him. He states that his time in prison became a form of treatment for him. He also commented that he attended the cultural ceremonies and visited with the Elder when he came to the prison. Elan also worked on Native art projects. Elan states that the introduction to his culture in prison was instrumental in his recovery. Elan continued to see the Elder he met in prison after his release. It was the Elder who told Elan that his experience in solitary confinement was similar to a vision quest or a fasting ceremony. Elan agreed that the experience he had in the hole had awakened him. Although he was not in solitary confinement by choice, the experience mimicked and served the same purpose as the most powerful healing ceremony in the culture.

Elan attributes some of his success in staying clean and sober to a recovery home once he left prison to start his new life. Elan also joined Alcoholics Anonymous, began volunteering

doing outreach and at the soup kitchen, which gave him a sense of purpose in helping others. He also took part in a program focused on partner violence which he found difficult because he needed to look at himself. Elan stated that he immersed himself in the culture and became a fire keeper for a local sweat lodge. He continued to do his art work, which he found therapeutic.

By this time, Elan had secured subsidized housing, and he was no longer homeless. The doing life graph demonstrates that culture played the largest role in Elan's recovery at this stage. Mainstream interventions also played a role in helping Elan recover. It is likely that neither culture nor mainstream intervention, on their own, would have produced the same result. Elan needed both culture and mainstream interventions to recover. He needed to go to two separate places to fill those needs. Elan stated that it would be beneficial to have an Indigenous halfway house to fill both those voids. Perhaps the same thing could be said for the other mainstream programs he accessed, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Detox, and the Partner Assault Response Program. Elan identifies a major gap in services for Aboriginal men in recovery.

### **THE ELDER LIFE STAGE**

Elan's story, life journey and resilience became a focus of the Poverty, Homelessness and Migration study. Elan was able to tell his story through research, and to do public speaking engagements and documentaries. Elan says his opportunity to contribute to important research is the main reason he has maintained sobriety and did not relapse back to living on the streets. He has learned that his life story and lessons are of great value to the community, and especially to those who are struggling to get off the streets or overcome substance abuse. Elan became an Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor for others who needed support, and he continued to contribute to the Poverty Homelessness and Migration study. The Elder Life Stage is a period when Elan will

reflect on his journey. In his comments on this life stage, the dominant themes are culture and mainstream interventions. He demonstrates growth, wisdom and resiliency, while embracing his Indigenous culture. He acknowledges that his struggles can be shared as teachings to younger generations and the community.

### **Elder (Age 49 and onwards)**

The Elder stage begins at age 49. This is the “giving back” stage, when people gain family, clan, and community responsibilities. When one becomes an Elder, one returns and teaches the young ones. People continue on that circle of teaching by passing on the knowledge to those coming from behind. During this time, the physical being dissipates, and the spiritual side grows stronger. As a person comes full circle, s/he is now closer than ever to being the spirit that s/he was at birth. Grandparents are closer to their grandchildren in the circle (adapted from Best Start Manual, 2010).

### ***Colonial violence***

Although colonial violence in Elan’s life decreased dramatically from levels at the beginning of his life stages, it still affected some of his life skills, even as an Elder.

Plus cooking for myself as a kid. Foster homes. They weren’t interested in me. They were interested in extra money, right.

When it comes to that there is no color. Cuz everybody, we’re all human, we’re wrapped in the same mistakes, it seems like, same greediness, everything. We’re human.

Elan remembers that he learned how to cook for himself in foster care, since they did not provide for him. He now uses this skill to take care of himself. Elan believes all colours of

people are the same, and that we are all affected by the same kinds of struggles. We are all human. Elan is experiencing less colonial violence in this elder stage.

### *Culture*

Elan has been actively involved in Indigenous cultural practices since he has been in recovery. Elan participates in various forms of traditional activities during this period in his life. He utilizes the lessons and knowledge that he has gained from his experiences to provide guidance and support to others.

It's in [a First Nation community nearby]. There's a healing lodge for kids, teenagers.

Yeah, he runs that, and the ceremonies, you see. He taught me the ceremonies, like the eagle and bear ceremonies.

No, my court worker, she's a good friend. I translate now for her in courts. I'm a witness, material witness, sometimes for people that want to help. I can see in their eyes that they want to quit, and not to people who go come on help me out there bro. I don't do that. I told them that before, too.

[There is a place] right on top the rapids. My mom and dad used to look there and say "that would be a nice log house there." It's all cleared now. So I'm going to build a log house there for my grandchildren can use, not me.

Cuz there are things in certain aspects of my problems is like that hard wood I see, there is a beautiful, beautiful something there trying to get out, and I get it out. And that's what I've been doing with my art. This beautiful person trying to get out all those years, and I let him out. You know. I learned a lot from living this terrible life. I just want to help...

I'm that ancient, no, I'm getting there, I'm half way. The mind is a universe in itself, and I have been going there to study.

Elan feels in his elder stage that culture has become an instrumental part of his life and healing. He continues to do his artwork and to sell it. He believes he has learned much from the universe and living the terrible life that he did. Elan does not believe he is an elder yet. He says he is not ancient, but he is half way there. Elan is learning ceremonies and beginning to practice and share those ceremonies with others to help them out. Culture has played the biggest role in Elan's life during the last couple of stages of his life.

### ***Abandonment***

Compared to past life stages, Elan's life as an Elder is less affected by abandonment. Now he reflects on how love and belonging affect him and what he still needs.

I don't know. I like ladies more. I don't know. I was never into that. That curiosity was never in me. I knew when I was a baby what it was all about. I knew it wasn't right.

Because they hurt. Love is not supposed to hurt. Some people say it's not love that hurts, it's the loneliness and rejection that hurts, not love. Love is awesome, I tell people. It's the after effects of a broken love that hurt, right. So love doesn't even hurt.

Elan reflects on his past hurts and experiences with love. He realizes love is nothing to fear—it's the loneliness and rejection that hurt. Now an adult, responsible for himself and making better life choices, Elan is experiencing significantly less abandonment in this life stage.

### *Unmet basic needs*

Even though Elan has transitioned into stable housing and has sustained recovery for a number of years, he still struggles with basic needs. He encounters numerous challenges due to food insecurity and unaffordable housing:

I lost my eight, nine, my ninth nephew this year or within the ten month period of time.

That's why I'm broke, that's why the Internet company is after me. I never paid that bill.

I was going to check [correspondence] back and forth. Every month I lost my sisters, my nephews.

I've been living off people. I cannot eat healthy. It's very expensive. I have to eat out of a can, you know, right. My food money goes to my rent. I sleep better when I don't care, that's probably why I ended up on the streets for so many years. The food bank, I get a lot of help from them. They feed me every month.

Pretending to inspect those units but they went to my house and dug around there. They went through my bins again. They checked the cross bays, I don't know why. I think they thought I have a grow op. As long as ODSP pays for my rent, I'm good. It goes direct deposit so I don't ever see the rent money, and all that. That's why one time they tried to double bill me for 2 months. They said I didn't pay for the last one, and I said, what, I don't know, talk to my worker, I don't deal with that, that's direct deposit.

Elan is now able to get more of his needs met. He does have housing, but living on ODSP barely pays the bills. He still needs to access the food banks and goes without food and other essential items at times. Although not all of his basic needs are met, he is certainly doing better

now than he ever has in his life. He is aware of the services he can access for help, although it is still hard to eat healthy on his limited income.

### ***Drugs and Alcohol***

Elan has been sober throughout the Elder life stage: “Cause I don’t drink, I don’t do drugs anymore, right.” Even though he acts as a support to people in his former street community, he has been steadfast in resisting substances and staying “clean”.

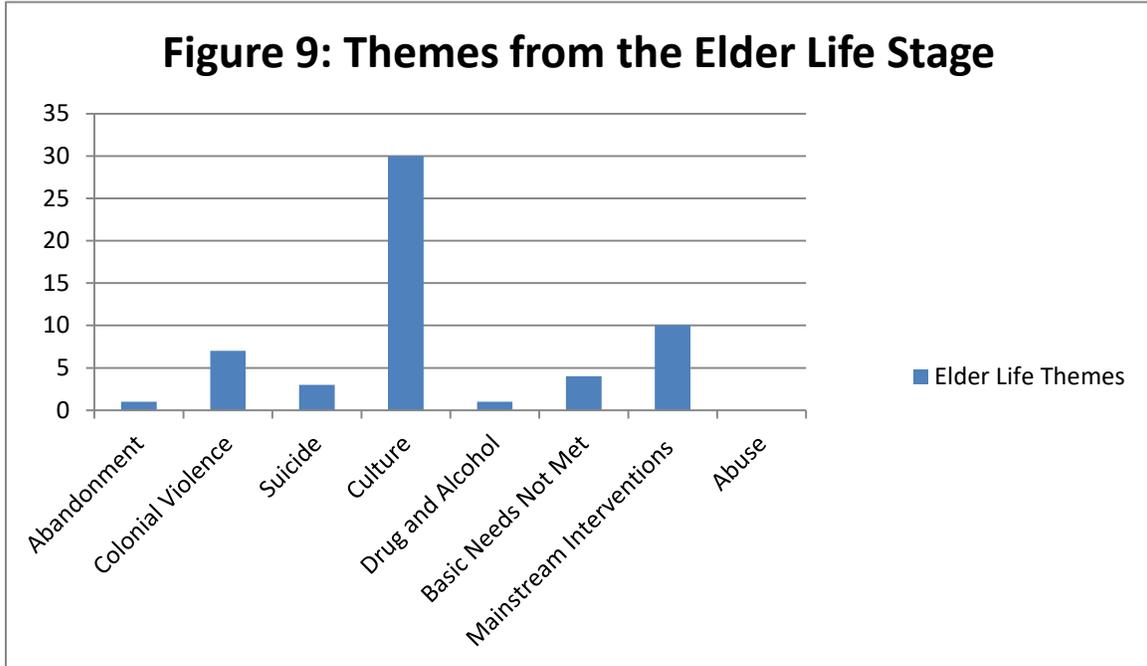
### ***Mainstream interventions***

Elan has taken on the responsibility of being the teacher for others who require the support and guidance that Elan rarely received during his life.

I was so happy to see the old crew. There was only about seven of us left, not even. And I was in Outreach now, and I’m talking to them. Oh my god, there’s my old crew from twenty years ago.

And I took him aside and said, Joe, forgive yourself, please. I forgave you guys a long time ago. And he goes, yah, but Elan you’re dying now. He said, you know what, the Elan you hurt years ago, he died. I’m not that guy anymore, Joe. But now he’s having a rough time. That’s what I tell my wife too, forgive yourself. That’s what I did, for most of my things. It’s easier. You learn to smile when you forgive. It’s like cancer; it eats you up in here.

Elan is now providing both mainstream and cultural interventions to help others who are on the street or trying to beat their addictions. Elan is slowly moving into the Elder stage and giving back all he has learned, becoming a teacher and helper himself.

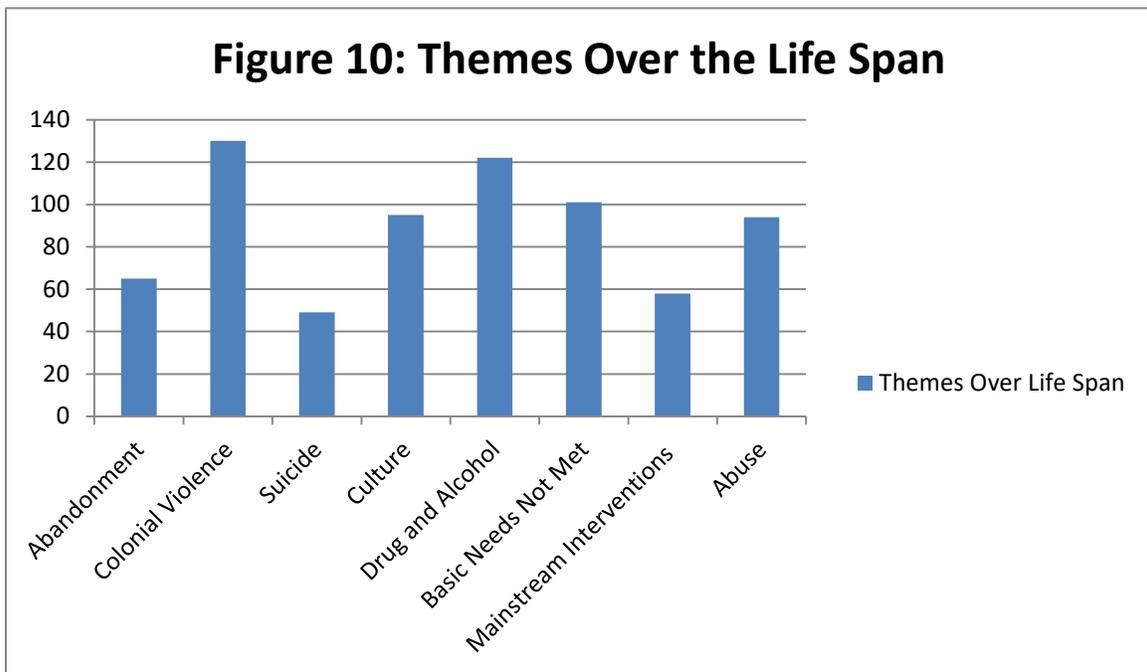


Elan is now entering his Elder life, when he has realized that he has learned a lot from the terrible life he has lived. He just wants to help others now. Elan is an excellent storyteller and shares freely with those that will listen as he gives back to the community everything that he has learned. Elan still struggles with poverty. However, he is very resourceful from the years on the streets and finds ways to survive on the little ODSP money that he receives. Elan volunteers a lot of his time helping others and is known on the street as an Uncle. Elan expects little in return for his help, demonstrating that over the years he has learned the great humility of an Elder.

Elan states that his mind is a universe, and he has been going there to study. Elan maintains his sense of humour, kindness, and generosity that he has shown throughout his life. He has found what his gifts are as the helper, storyteller and clown. He has future goals to build a log house for his grandchildren and to build a halfway house grounded in Indigenous culture and

ways of healing. Elan was clear that the halfway house will be Indigenous in its foundation, however all people will be welcome. He expresses the view that colours should not divide us.

Elan says, “A lot of us will have to be humble too. I have. I have been humbled so many times”. Elan states that the main reason people are on the street and addicted to substances is unresolved pain that turns into anger. He said that holding onto anger would kill you—it is like cancer. Elan has many things to be resentful or angry about, but he has chosen to find peace with the darkness, not for those that have done him wrong but for himself. Elan has expressed many wise teachings that he has acquired through his lived experience. He has reflected upon and learned about the most important things in life.



Over Elan’s life span, he suffered a great deal of colonial violence, which was a major contributor to his unmet basic needs and the abuse that he suffered. It is clear that the more colonial violence Elan suffered, the more abuse he endured and the more his needs were not met.

In turn, Elan turned to substance abuse to cope with the pain, loss, loneliness and belief that he did not belong anywhere other than on the streets. He also viewed himself as bad, a hopeless case, and he was suicidal most of his life up to his doing life. When Elan began to learn his cultural traditions and to access Elders and healing, in conjunction with some positive mainstream interventions, he was able to turn his life around.

## **DISCUSSION**

This thesis utilizes the Ojibway teaching of the Seven Life Stages to analyze and understand the narratives of an Indigenous person who lived with homelessness his whole life. Four key findings emerged from my analysis.

It was apparent that if critical and culturally-relevant interventions had been provided to Elan during his good life, this would have changed his life path. If Elan and his parents had been able to access basic needs, cultural, family support, and had not been exposed to the devastating effects of the multi-generational trauma from residential school, Elan would likely have lived a very different life. It was during his good life, and under the influence of that trauma, that Elan learned abandonment and rejection, his positive and negative coping skills, and his beliefs about himself and the world. Positive interventions, the proper care, safety, culture, and services to have his family's needs met would have changed Elan's trajectory.

Another key finding was that exposure to colonial violence had a direct impact on Elan's life. The analysis shows that the more he was exposed to colonial violence, the more self-destructive behaviour and negative coping skills Elan displayed. This shows a direct link to the

devastating power that colonial violence and oppression can have on an individual. This finding is in line with the research literature, which also documents the destructive effects of residential schools, churches and the 60s Scoop had on Indigenous people.

Although cultural practices did not appear to play a major role in Elan's early life, he speaks about reclaiming the culture later on, when he was in jail and during his recovery. Taking a closer look at Elan's narrative, we can see that culture was embedded in Elan's way of being. He has always valued concepts of sharing, community, family, brotherhood, and healing. He speaks about the importance of doing art work in his healing. He played the role of a helper throughout his life, always trying to be of service to others in some way. Elan exhibits the humour that is woven into the Indigenous culture, and furthermore he assumes the sacred role of the clown. He uses his clowning to teach others, to cope, and to heal. By participating in the interviews, he practices the oral tradition of storytelling. Culture is a fundamental part of who Elan is and always has been.

We often used the term survivor to identify people who have experienced traumatic events, such as residential school or sexual assault. Elan is able to demonstrate what it truly means to be a survivor. Survival was never something Elan could take for granted. In his earliest years, he learned to survive at all costs, or die. For example, he learned to eat from the dump or starve. He demonstrated this will to survive throughout his life on the street; it is how he was able to survive prison, racism, violence, assault, poverty, the elements, abandonment and loneliness. He survived by numbing his pain with alcohol and drugs, by running away, by creating street families. He survived by learning how to fight, so he could protect himself from being beaten up or murdered. Elan was a true survivor his whole life, and although this is

something to be proud of, it comes at the price of being an exhausting existence. The moment a survivor gives up fighting to survive, he or she dies.

## CONCLUSIONS

For years, research on Aboriginal people has focused on deficits. The *Urban Aboriginal Middle Class* study focuses on the success, strengths and resilience of Aboriginal people. The results of this thesis are informative for understanding the key moments in one's life stages and life circumstances that lead individuals down the path of hardship, homelessness and poverty, as opposed to the path of success or *bimaadiziwin*. These findings can inform social work practice and social policy on how to place resources where and when they are needed the most.

### **Limitations and Strengths of the study**

Utilizing the Ojibway seven life stages teaching as a road map to analyze Elan's narrative is a new method in social work research, and there were no other publications that had used this approach. Because this is a new method, it was challenging at times to chronologically place Elan's experiences in the correct life stage, since most of his narratives speak to multiple points in his life. It took a great deal of time to put his story in a chronological order.

Furthermore, the results clearly show that the more colonial violence Elan experiences, the more abuse, suicidal ideation, and trauma he faced. It was difficult to determine, at first, which came first: the chicken or the egg. However, Elan's trauma started at the beginning—with his good life. Elan discloses that his mother was a residential school survivor, which had a direct impact on his care as a baby and young child. He also shares that there was a significant amount

of abuse in the home and school: spousal, physical, and sexual abuse and neglect. Elan stated that the people in trusted positions of authority, such as members of the church, school teachers and CAS, also perpetuated the cycles of abuse.

It became clear that, at the onset of Elan's life, he was directly experiencing the results of multi-generational trauma from colonization and the residential school system. In Elan's life the pain came first from a dysfunctional family system and a community plagued by poverty, assimilation, oppression and genocide. Gabor Mate suggests that we should not ask why the addiction, but rather, why the pain?

The strengths from the study arose from the great amount of literature written about the multi-generational impacts of residential schools, poverty, homelessness, the 60s scoop, racism and oppression on Indigenous people. The literature was relevant to understanding Elan's struggles as a part of systemic racism that has oppressed Indigenous people since colonization. Elan's narrative was unique, but he was not alone in his struggles, as many other Indigenous people have shared them.

The study demonstrates that Indigenous cultural interventions played a significant role in Elan's recovery. Later in Elan's life, mainstream institutions, such as shelters, detox, jail, outreach programs and transition homes, also became helpful. These institutions have come a long way in providing more culturally appropriate services to welcome and assist Indigenous people. There is now a greater understanding about the oppression that Indigenous people have endured. A majority of social service agencies have now developed mandates to serve Indigenous people, and the staff, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, are being mandated by

their organizations and the province to take Cultural Safety Training. In the early years in Elan's life, these types of services did not exist for him.

### **Relevance for Social Work Practice**

It is clear that the difficulties in Elan's life began during the first seven years. Colonial violence greatly affected him, his family and his community. Elan's rough start in life set the direction for many years to come when the same types of issues that plagued him as a child repeatedly re-traumatized him. It was not until Elan's last time in prison, as an adult, that he was exposed to his culture and Elders. Elan also spent a great deal of time in solitary confinement, which was later interpreted by the Elders as a sort of a Fasting Ceremony or Vision Quest for Elan. Elan explains that he had visions while he was in "the hole" and was visited by spirits. He also speaks about seeing glimpses of his life in the future, of what it could be like if he chose the right path. Elan's experience in prison and new connection with the culture awakened his spirit and inspired him to continue on this path when he was released from prison. Elan later asked the Elders for his spirit name and became a Shkabewis fire keeper. The help of a recovery home and programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Partner Assault Response supported him to contribute in a meaningful way to his community through research, and volunteer work propelled Elan into healing and sobriety.

The cultural interventions that Elan received late in life could have been applied in his good life, thereby changing Elan's direction in life from the beginning. Rites of passage, such as the naming ceremony, the fasting ceremony and the vision quest, could have been employed during his Good Life and Fast Life. Interventions such as Alcoholics Anonymous, treatment programs or Partner Assault Response may not have been needed later in his life, if a healthy,

positive community and his cultural traditions had supported him. Unfortunately, the data analysis clearly shows the negative impact of residential schools, multigenerational trauma and the church and its clergy on Elan's life.

Intergenerational trauma still has a strong grip on our communities. Many Indigenous children are being born into difficult situations like Elan's. It is important for social workers to intervene during the critical stages of the Good Life with meaningful and culturally-grounded interventions. Communities need the appropriate resources to ensure that their basic needs are met, as well as their cultural traditions and identity. Elan's narrative answers the research question that the factors needed for an urban Aboriginal person to achieve *bimaadiziwin* are a supportive/healthy cultural community, opportunity to give back in a meaningful way, traditional healing, a sense of belonging and personal identity. Ideally, each person's access to these will be ensured in childhood.

Elan speaks about his vision in the future, in which there are cultural services for people coming out of prison or trying to recover from substance abuse. He envisions services that are grounded in Indigenous healing traditions, and where everyone is welcome to attend from all racialized groups. Elan noted that those services were not there for him. However, he was able to find them on his own. He stated that healing interventions in any stage of life need to arise from the culture, our own ways of being, living and healing. Mainstream organizations can be useful by supporting and assisting Indigenous communities to provide services with homegrown solutions. Investing in the idea of a healthy community, healthy Elders, and healthy families can go a long way in breaking the cycle of multi-generational trauma, internalized oppression and the cycles of abuse and poverty. Initiatives such as Healthy Babies, Indigenous Schools, Indigenous health care, and child protection can go a long way in not only healing and preserving the

culture, but also creating employment, pride, and the opportunity to give back in a meaningful way. Opportunities for communities to have access to healthy foods, recreation, physical activities—such as karate, and sports, which were helpful to Elan—would also provide young people with positive outlets. Places where youth can play safely and develop their skills are crucial during the Good Life and Fast Life.

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## **APPENDIX A**

I will ask the following questions when reading the interview transcripts. The questions appear to be closed-ended; however, I will explore themes and search for direct quotes and narratives that speak to the questions.

### **Demographics**

1. Age and gender
2. Martial Relationship (single, married/common law, divorced/separated, widowed)
3. Employment
4. Housing and shelter, staying with a friend or own home
5. Level of yearly income
6. Level of education
7. Aboriginal community or tribe

### **Early Years (good life age 1-7)**

8. Birth parents, foster care, extended family or adoption
9. Where born
10. Experiences of poverty and what did that experience look like
11. Residential school or impacts on life in any way
12. Was CAS involved
13. Recall of any family violence
14. Recall of any drug or alcohol abuse
15. What role did culture play

16. Were the churches or religion a part of life?
17. Siblings and relationships with them
18. Knowledge of native language
19. Main stream primary school or a First Nations school
20. Were any serious health problems experienced related to poverty, or substance abuse

**Fast Life (age 7-14)**

21. What level of education
22. Attended post-secondary school?
23. What was the experience with school
24. Employment
25. Where the churches or religion a part of life and if so what was the experience
26. Recall any family violence
27. Were there any serious health problems that experienced related to poverty, or substance abuse
28. Experience of poverty in this stage
29. What major challenges faced during this time of life
30. What major success faced during this time of life
31. Experiences of racism and some examples
32. Elders played a role in life? And if so what role did they play
33. Experienced racism from the police or health care settings?
34. Utilized Aboriginal services to help; if so which ones,
35. Were cultural traditions a part of life
36. Feeling of belonging to a community

37. Speak your Native Language
38. Ever incarcerated
39. Ever homeless or lived on the street
40. Are parents involved? What was relationship with them like
41. Abuse drugs and alcohol
42. Describe self as introverted or extroverted
43. Have any children in this stage of life.
44. Have role models or supports and who where they.
45. Level of income
46. Role of extended family in life

The same set of questions will repeat itself for the next five stages.