Transcript of Interview with Bill Mussel

[00:06]

I was born and raised in a small Indigenous community in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. We're actually situated right on the border of the Fraser River, and our people in this nation are called Stó:lō people, meaning “people of the river.” And of course, then, that means from a cultural perspective, much of what was really important to our growth and development and survival generally was the nurturance we obtained from the river and what was naturally available through Mother Earth in regard to the game that was plentiful in the area. We had, as my grandfather explained, we had thousands and thousands of ducks and geese and other water-based life that loved the area and multiplied like crazy. Dad said that when he was a kid they could harvest ducks by sneaking up at them in the creek or pond and use a big board to catch them, and to injure them with the board and to be able to bring them home to be roasted, you know, that kind of thing. I was the first of our community to finish– to go to high school and to go to university. And my parents paid tuition fees for us to go to public school because the only choice we had was the day school on the reserve, which was not at all equipped to teach anybody anything really, or be removed from the family and go to residential school, which they totally refused to do, thank goodness, as I learned in terms of what took place.

[02:07]

And when I started public school I did really well because I had lots and lots of skills that I‘d learned naturally within my own community because the families on the whole were English-speaking families, which, you know, at this point, I say it was tragic because I would have loved to be a speaker of our traditional language because through the work I've been doing for more than 70 years, I recognize the tremendous power of language and the meaning of life that’s conveyed within the language and how that meaning is conveyed. And so as I grew up as, a 19- and 20-year-old, for example, after I finished high school and was in university for a few years, I joined the executive of the North American Indian Brotherhood, which has been recreated by the Interior Tribes of British Columbia, which means the tribes of interior British Columbia that were very concerned about changes to the *Indian Act*, and the task that the organization undertook by being recreated was to do some community-based research to identify the changes we needed to make to that legislation. And because I could read and write and could type and had some governance experience, I was elected to the executive and I very much was a principal negotiator– not a negotiator, a researcher, in the community meetings that we held and ended up producing a report that addressed changes to the *Indian Act* we wanted, among other related matters.

[03:55]

That was the beginning of my experience in addressing work involving the government, different levels of government, and the way in which the non-Indigenous or settler world operates. And I found myself very often quite frustrated because when you're kind of the lead in discussion and whatnot, you really expect process, you expect respect, you expect the kinds of things you were raised with as values, and those values very much are highly dependent upon the relational nature of life, the whole process of living life, and living according to the teachings of the Great Spirit and Mother Earth, you know, which we learned as children that the things about life that we need to learn are really before us at all times. And that was what's provided by Mother Earth in terms of the elements that constitute that Earth and the way in which they live and survive and function in a form of balance that enables continuing dynamism in regard to the lifestyle. And what frustrated me in regard to being a spokesman for our groups with the North American Indian Brotherhood was that the people there tended to operate as experts and pretended they knew the answers for us, and we constantly did whatever we could to try and figure out how to help them begin to understand that what they think about us and what they believe about us is totally wrong. And great efforts were made to do that.

[05:52]

And I remember when the White Paper policy was developed, chiefs from across Canada convened at meetings and made their presentations, and I had the pleasure of attending several of those hearings and noticed that really, little of anything was documented in terms of the officials from government present. They were sitting there listening more than anything else. But you didn't see any writing, compared to the presentations of the chiefs that were well researched in many cases, and they went into a great deal of detail in order to make sure that there was some greater understanding of our thoughts about the *Indian Act* and what really needed to be changed and why. We ended up with the White Paper, as most of you know, by knowing a bit of the history, that what was in the White Paper, really had little, really had nothing significant to do with the thoughts and views of the presentations from the chiefs.

[07:06]

I want to speak a bit about the importance of voice, and I'm happy to do that because I ended up becoming a teacher. I did studies in social work, I did graduate work in animal education, and I have been in the business of making– helping people learn to make meeting, and enjoying the kinds of things that others do to help me enlarge my own ability to make meaning of life and to be able to share stories and to build on stories and continue a process of learning how to learn and live and being able to help others to do the same. The second principle in the guiding principles was the voice of Indigenous Peoples will guide the collaborative and teams will be expected to model the approach. That was of particular concern to me because voice, really, is words-based. It reminded me a lot of the settler society where they tend to want to serve as experts, no appreciation of the kind of thinking that's generated through relationships and

helping or working together in a way to pool the best thinking that we can bring to bear and to share and to make meaning of the different points of view so that we have a consensus that represents the best thinking of the group.

[08:52]

And that really was the process with which I was raised and certainly was trained in by working with the members of the North American Indian Brotherhood, because most of them were people in their 40s, 50s and 60s mainly, who were operating as spokesmen and leaders of the First Nations communities in the interior of British Columbia. And I found myself, because I had been, was at university and had been in the public school system, ended up doing a lot of knowledge translation for our own people, my parents' peers, really in the organization, and knowledge translation really, in terms of elaborating on things in English that helped the people of the bands to understand more clearly what was meant by certain concepts that were being talked about, you know, like legislation and the law and constitutions and bylaws and those kinds of concepts in particular. When I had a chance to become engaged with this project with CFHI, I was filling the role as an Elder advisor to the First Peoples Wellness Circle that was a new name for what was the North American, or Native Mental Health Association of Canada that I had the pleasure of serving for 20 years consecutively as president, an organization that featured education and training of community-based leadership.

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And so what our organization was all about was really about building relationships and helping people to discover the consensus decision making and the tremendous importance of pooling of best thinking in regard to issues and questions about life and the challenges facing us, very often associated as Ed was mentioning, associated with health and well-being. And so when we were discussing the guiding principles and looked at voice, I was very concerned that we be sensitive to the fact that when we're trying to understand the messages of voice, it needed to include sensitivity to the kinds of behaviours and actions that people lived, because the culture, or the significance of culture or a way of life was demonstrated by the way in which we lived our life, by the way we behaved. And very often, as I've learned over the years, the way we live our life isn't necessarily something we're that much aware of, and many of us would have difficulty trying to describe what it is that we're living as a way of life in words. But certainly, many of us in that situation would have the ability to show others what it is we mean and to do a demonstration to illustrate the best as they could what it is they mean.

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And so I was very concerned and in the work that we were doing in regard to teams that are made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, that we have as much mutual

understanding as possible and [unclear] what it is we're doing, how we're doing it, and to be sensitive to the fact that that sensitivity should include awareness of people's movement and behaviour and their expression, the non-verbal sources of messaging, and to consider the importance of that as information that will help us to truly understand what's taking place and what it is that's being talked about, or what is meant in regard to any kind of decision making that we need to make. After I joined the coaches category of participants, and that was about the time that Denise became involved, I had the pleasure of choosing Denise as a co-partner with me from British Columbia because we had worked together for several years. And we ended up constituting the team of two that served the Churchill group in Manitoba and the Alberta group that constituted one of the teams.

[14:23]

As the, I was– the point that I wanted to make was that I ended up being the chairman of the guidance group and really enjoyed being co-chair with Carol of CFHI, and again doing everything that we could to honour the implementation of the guiding principles, and in particular paying particular attention to knowledge translation both ways, in terms of the English speakers, in terms of what it is they're talking about to help make sure that we understand as the Indigenous participants and vice-versa, that they understand our Indigenous points of view, and appreciating at all times that the project we were working on had to build on strengths of the Indigenous community and how important it was that we build on those strengths in regard to the knowledge that we rely upon in making the decisions and choosing the directions we go, and as was described, creating the kinds of living circumstances where each of us feels safe enough and comfortable enough with each other relationally to be able to be open and honest about our thoughts and feelings and, particularly, comfortable about talking about our inner life, as opposed to playing it safe at all times and waiting for the circumstances to say something that really had little to do with our inner world, because I'm a real believer that we really– we're challenged as human beings to bring together things of our external world with our inner world, and when we're able to do that, we're able to make the kind of meaning necessary that's going to help us to navigate life quite successfully, along with many other people because of the importance of community in our life on Mother Earth, and the importance of all working together, much like it is modelled through Mother Earth for us to be able to ensure that we're attending to the needs of people of seven generations and more into the future.

[16:56]

Willie Ermine, a colleague who I've met who was teaching in Saskatchewan and now basically retired but still working hard, introduced the concept of "ethical space." It's a concept very much connected with the importance of dialogue between culturally diverse people, and generally English-speaking and Indigenous-speaking people. And the concept of an ethical space really is designed, it's a paradigm designed to facilitate and bring about a meaningful relationship

development and meaningful communication that would result in a mutual understanding of what it is that we need to do together, and how important it is that we feel safe enough with each other to take the risks of speaking from the heart and beginning to learn by doing that, that speaking from the heart really helps us to supplement what it is that we're sharing that accesses the ability to think and reason, really, to rely upon the power of the brain, and that when we can begin to relate in that way, as people as I see it, we're able to begin to draw on the energy and resources of other people, including ourselves in the circumstance, but upon other people that some of our elders really describe as being– accessing the spiritual dimensions of life.

[18:45]

And I believe that the work that we've done as CFHI and the dynamics of group number seven, which we chose as the group to focus upon as we do the evaluation and produce a report regarding the work that we've done, that I would think what's significant there is the quality of the relationships and the discussions that clearly demonstrated that in order to accomplish our purpose and mission as the projects and in particular with group seven, that we did achieve what it was we were set out, that we set out to do, in that it was, that achievement is represented by the fact that we're reliant upon Indigenous knowledge that's being honoured by the non-Indigenous participants, but at the same time, recognizing that the knowledge we create together as diverse populations of people is knowledge, we as Indigenous thought leaders have been taught to recognize, is knowledge that is not owned, it's knowledge of the Creator, it's not, it can be identified as Indigenous knowledge, but it's not owned by any particular people in most circumstances, and therefore it's really important that we truly value the creation of knowledge and in many ways in regard to our project, I recognize that in many ways we're beginning to recognize contributions that have been made to life in Canada by our ancestors, and they're contributions really that have never been acknowledged in the past that I think we're entering a stage where we're going to be able to do that on a much larger scale, as more projects like the one we've been part of are implemented. Thank you.

[21:01]

My name is William Mussell, nickname is Bill, named after my father and my grandfather, and a big tradition in our culture, where there is real pride in being named after ancestors, I think very often because there are people who see the qualities you possess as being very much like the qualities of those ancestors. I intentionally chose not to introduce myself when I made my first statement, mainly because I wanted to share a bit of information that I learned when I was a very young leader.

[21:51]

A very respected Elder of Vancouver Island explained at a meeting the importance of not ever blowing your own horn, of not ever talking about yourself. And the reason I had the discussion with him was because he had asked me to be his voice when he was offered an honorary doctorate at the University of Victoria, and that would involve, he explained to me, me talking about him and celebrating his life orally at the university because he was taught by his culture that you don't ever blow your own horn. You don't ever talk about yourself in any circumstance. And I believe there are many cultures of our Indigenous nations in Canada that have a similar belief, and for that reason, many of us have difficulty talking about ourselves in the way that non-Indigenous people do and often don't have much difficulty because they have greater practice doing that. And that was why I chose not to introduce myself initially, so I would remember, so thank you, Marion, for reminding me that I really needed to explain or provide my name. Again, I find it awkward, really, to talk about myself in that way. And I believe what's really important is that anything and everything we do be oriented toward moving people forward, but the people moving themselves forward with your support and guidance and help whenever possible. But you don't do it for the people. And I think that's really an important part of the underlying teachings of the work that we've done with the collaborative.

[24:11]

Now, for sustainability, I generally believe this: that if we experience the benefits of teaching and learning through the building of relationships and the sharing of stories and lived life experiences and create a need to know on the part of those we're interacting with, because by interacting in that way, we're really demonstrating a need to know, if we can inspire that kind of activity, and people experience the payoffs and the benefits from enhancing their knowledge and understanding and enhancing their ability to form relationships with other people and other things and Mother Nature and so on, they're going to be able to embrace life more fully and by embracing life then take care of sustainability. I sense from the work that I've done with my projects that the people in Alberta and Churchill in many ways are continuing to engage in those kinds of activities and can be identified as supporting sustainability and modelling sustainability. And I think some of them, too, while doing it as an organized group, will also be doing it individually. And I think those of us who learn the joys of it will do it individually and collectively, and the more that we can do that in Canada, I think the richer our relationships will be in Canada, and I think the richer our life as Canadians will become. Thank you.

[26:06]

As a final comment in regard to the meaningfulness of the engagement, I was very pleased to be able to serve as co-chair of the group, because I've always been a true believer in creating conditions and situations where people could take charge of their own lives, to be in touch with their thinking and their beliefs and their understanding, and to facilitate processes that bring those things about. And the participants in this guidance group, where most of them were highly

motivated to enhance their awareness, understanding and knowledge and their effectiveness as leaders, both those of Indigenous background and those of non-Indigenous background. And the big plus, or the gift as Ed speaks of, the big gift was that they had an opportunity together, to work collaboratively together and by doing that enhance the richness of their lives, that I sense is what Nancy is really focusing on, and I have to admit that I really enjoyed the learning as well. And that learning to me was highlighted by the laughter that we enjoyed together, at meals and other gatherings connected with our meetings, and the same kind of things, the same kind of laughter and enjoyment that we share by telephone and even by Zoom.

[27:52]

And so to me, there's lots of evidence of the big pluses, the gifts, and they represent the kinds of possibilities for [unclear]. And the key, of course, is that we always think about, we remember and we have lots of reasons to remember what it was it was like and to want to be able to share that remembering with other people as we go on and live our life, and they in turn do the same kind of thing, so that we really, truly learn to value living in a very strongly connected, interconnected, and form of togetherness that's essential to live life well. And the final point, and I think to remember always that anything and everything we do together as people be done with thoughts about contributing to the making of a richer and better life. And I think if we follow that guide, we would do less and less of things that might be identified with negativity and criticism and put-downs that result in shame and other things that really immobilize and contribute to dysfunctionality of human life, in a world where there's such richness and joy that it's a pity that we do create conditions for people to live in that negative way. All my relations.