

# SPIRITUALITY IN THE 90'S AND

## THE DAY A RED-TAILED HAWK

### FEATHER FELL TO EARTH

It was twenty-seven years ago that the name "Two-Spirit" came to a group of Indigenous gays gathered at a former Boy Scout Camp near Beausejour, Manitoba. The shooting of JJ Harper in March of 1988 had given way to increasing activism among Indigenous people in Canada, especially in Winnipeg. In June of 1990, MLA Elijah Harper brought down the Meech Lake Accord and the Oka Crisis erupted in July. Queer Indigenous activism had already begun in the US in 1975 when Randy Burns and Barbara Cameron created the Gay American Indians (GAI) organization in San Francisco. Later, the Greater Vancouver Native Cultural Society was founded in 1979 by Georgina Ross and Laurie Macdonald. In Winnipeg, the Nichiwakan Native Gay Society was organized in 1986 as a response to the suicides of two First Nations youth.

Wherever there was Indigenous activism in that era, you would find Queer activists participating in the action. Some of the Nichiwakan leaders were Roger Armitte, Myra Laramée, Connie Merasty, Barbara Bruce, Peetanacoot Nenakawekapo, Ginette St. Amant, Dorland, McKay, Cole McGillivray and myself. During that summer in 1990, the National Film Board of Canada came to Winnipeg to include Connie Merasty in the LGBT documentary, "Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth." Cole McGillivray, the head of the Awasikan Theatre, presented the play, "Awena Nena?", (Who am I?) at that year's Winnipeg Fringe Festival. Having participated in the inaugural international gathering of Native American gays and lesbians in Minneapolis in 1988, the Nichiwakan Society decided to host the third annual gathering outside of Beausejour.

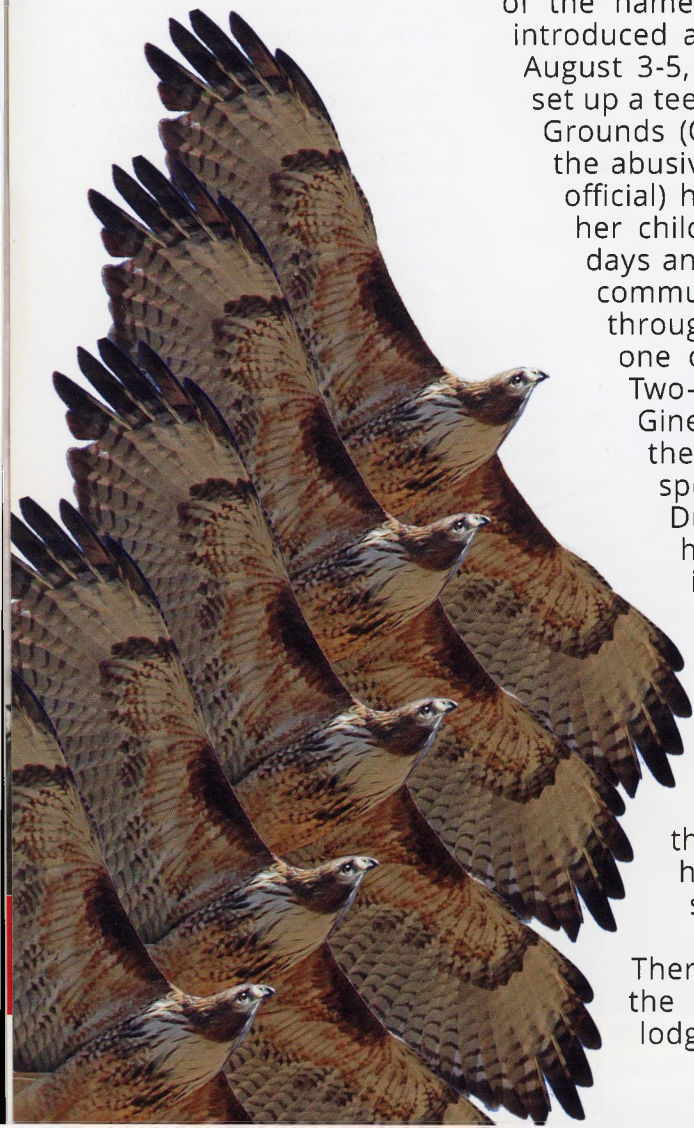
A focal interest in coming together as gay people was to learn more about our cultural identities and ceremonial practices, which had not been passed to many of us. Vernon Paul approached Elder Barbara Daniels, who eventually became our traditional teacher. When she first met with us she didn't know we were gay until we told her. She was surprised at first but told us that her spirit name meant that she was a teacher and that was what she would do with us. Our theme for the gathering became

# "IT WAS TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AGO THAT THE NAME 'TWO-SPIRIT' CAME"

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"Spirituality in the 90's," because we wanted to bring our peers together to share what we knew from our various languages, histories, cultures and regions.

A woman-centred activist event occurred that summer as well. This protest led to the emergence of the name Two-Spirit, which was eventually introduced at the gathering that happened on August 3-5, 1990. A First Nations woman had set up a teepee on the corner of the Legislative Grounds (Osborne and Broadway) to protest the abusive power that her husband (a Band official) had wielded in separating her from her children. She fasted in the teepee for days and many women from the Winnipeg community would come and support her through the day and night. Myra was one of them, and one night the name Two-Spirit came to her and her partner Ginette. Later, on a hot afternoon at the gathering, a circle of eighty people spoke about the teaching of respect. During this time, a red-tailed hawk hovered over us as the name was introduced. The gathering itself was tumultuous and grand at times as we explored our life-experiences, ceremony, teachings, and our fears and anxieties. Over one-hundred Two-Spirit people came from every corner of North America and I believe this constellation of gifted spirits helped us open a doorway into the spiritual realm to receive the gifts that are meant for us. Nazareth Therriault built our sweat lodge at the site, near a place where sweat lodges are still held to this day. At the



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closing ceremony, Chrystos, an American Indian poet, read her poem, “Untitled” (a give-away poem), in which she described one of the gathering’s most powerful ceremonies: “I give you the moon shining on a fire of singing women”.

The name Two-Spirit was quickly embraced by many Queer Indigenous groups across North America and has become a cultural phenomenon. At the outset, I believe that it described the source of our creation: the spirits of our parents who gave us life. Some people assume that it reinforces a colonial concept of binary gender (male and female) and that it causes confusion about how a person can have two spirits. But now, after many years of reflection, its meaning has become malleable and mysterious, and it continues to evolve and resonate for me. Today, I believe that the Two-Spirit name (whoever or whatever it refers to) is about the depth of strength that we possess to be who we are, and to carry a name brought to us from the spiritual realm. Today, almost all First Nations in Canada have replaced their colonial names with traditional names in their language. And we, Two-Spirit Indigenous people, are aligned with the spirit-naming and re-naming practices of our cultures - an important aspect of decolonization and Indigenous resurgence. As Beverly Little Thunder said at the gathering, “We are special.”

## TWO-SPIRIT

More details about the 1990 gathering and the Two-Spirit name can be found in the report, “A New Look at Homophobia and Heterosexism in Canada.” <https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/resources/a-new-look-at-homophobia-and-heterosexism-in-canada/>



### ALBERT MCLEOD

Albert McLeod is a Status Indian with ancestry from Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and the Metis community of Norway House in northern Manitoba. He has over thirty years of experience as a human rights activist and is one of the directors of the Two-Spirited People of Manitoba. Albert lives in Winnipeg, where he works as a consultant specializing in HIV/AIDS and Indigenous peoples, cultural reclamation, and cross-cultural training. [www.albertmcleod.com](http://www.albertmcleod.com)

## DISCONNECTION/RECONNECTION TO CEREMONY AND TWO-SPIRIT SACREDNESS

Through my doctoral research, I learned that in the early 1800s, priests in “Manitoba” were upset that Métis people called themselves Catholic but also participated in “La Grande Médecine” (Midewiwin lodge). I uncovered ways that the British/Canadian governments disconnected Métis from our First Nations cousins and ceremonies: refusing to sign treaties with Métis, excluding Métis from registered Indian status, indoctrinating Christianity via education (day/residential schools) and child welfare

(60s Scoop), and repressing Métis after our resistance on the prairies in 1885. Such disconnection (also felt among our First Nations relatives) included the loss of cultural and spiritual understandings of gender and sexuality as they would have been taught to us in the Midewiwin lodge.

Colonization targeted genders and sexualities that didn't fit the European model for eradication; as a result, homophobia became a real problem in many Indigenous communities - and today, the suicide rate among queer Indigenous youth is disproportionately high. Some elders insist homosexuality didn't exist on Turtle Island (North America) before white people arrived, that homosexuality was brought here on their boats. I've heard of Two-Spirit people being turned away from ceremony. Yet, countless anthropological texts discuss third and fourth genders, and sexuality that defied European understanding, existing among many Indigenous nations. There are words for such people in many Indigenous languages; while I have yet to find a Michif word to describe us, we most certainly existed historically as we do today.

## TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE IN CREATION

Recently, I passed tobacco to the Chief of a Midewiwin lodge in Shoal Lake, ON. - himself a Two-Spirit person. After a pipe ceremony and traditional feast, and with the help of a Grandmother Water Drum, he generously shared with me (and two others who were present) a one-hour portion of the Midewiwin Anishinaabe Creation Story featuring Two-Spirit people...We're in the Creation Story - we've always been here! He gave me permission to share this knowledge with others.

Here is part of the story he shared: early in human history, there emerged human beings that displayed a curiosity for knowledge and an ability for compassion that set them apart – they could love in a way that others couldn't. Spirit chose them as spiritual/ceremonial knowledge-carriers and tasked them with keeping community together (among other things). There have been times in human history when humanity had forgotten the original instructions Creator gave us for *mino-bimaadiziwin* (good, healthy, balanced life); the beings who were not like the others brought reminders of Creator's instructions. These ones are called *naawenaangweyaabeg* – those in the centre who keep others from wandering. While this is an Anishinaabe teaching, I have no doubt there are teachings like this in many other Indigenous nations.

## “BEING TWO-SPIRIT IS A GIFT FROM CREATOR”

If our youth could grow up hearing these teachings, and knowing about the important work that Creator entrusted to us as Two-Spirit people, the suicide rate would decrease. For this reason, I will continue passing tobacco to learn about our roles as *naawenaangweyaabeg* and respectfully share this knowledge so that others can also know who they are, and together we can pick up our work. Being Two-Spirit is a gift from Creator: the work we do is needed to help our communities regain health and wellbeing. We are sacred. If you have the gift of being Two-Spirit, we need your help and the work that you can contribute. We need you to uncover the teachings from your nations and share that medicine; we are collectively reviving our understandings of gender and sexuality, and healing from the wounds of colonial thinking.

## MIIGWETCH

### CHANTAL FIOLA



Chantal Fiola is Red River Métis with family from St. Laurent and Ste. Geneviève, MB. She is the author of *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality*, which won her the John Hirsch Award for Most Promising Manitoba Writer and the Beatrice Mosionier Aboriginal Writer of the Year Award (2016). Dr. Fiola is an Assistant Professor in the Urban and Inner-City Studies Department at the University of Winnipeg. She is currently undertaking a SSHRC-funded research study exploring Métis relationships with ceremony in Manitoba Métis communities. Chantal is Two-Spirit, Midewiwin, and a Sundancer.