

## Turning to Traditional Processes for Supporting Mental Health: An Interview with Ashley Carvill

Ashley Carvill interviewed by Hayden King

*The Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship is a policy and leadership development program recognizing leadership potential among young northern Canadians eager to address policy challenges facing the North. This interview is part of a series Yellowhead is publishing, featuring discussions with 2018-2019 Fellows on their fellowship policy papers.*

Here, Hayden King, Executive Director of Yellowhead Institute, speaks to 2018-2019 Glassco Fellow, Ashley Carvill on her paper, *Turning to Traditional Processes for Supporting Mental Health*, which explores the positive impacts traditional values and practices can have on mental health and wellbeing. She focuses on strengthening community through traditional virtues, values and pursuits.

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**HAYDEN:** What compelled you to focus on the intersection of mental health and governance in your term as a fellow?

**ASHLEY:** When I started a new position within the government at Carcross/Tagish First Nation (C/TFN) I noticed how refreshed I was and how burnt out I had been getting working in the health and wellness field. I bounced ideas off of the fellows and my mentor for the fellowship, wondering how many people felt similarly, not only in my community, but my life personally. Working frontline in a very Western style of governance, you're constantly trying to break down silos just to have that connection again and be a community. For me, it was really personal and that's why a lot of my report reflects my experience working with the government of Carcross/Tagish First Nation.

**As I did the work, I found out that burnout, fatigue, stress leave aren't unique to me or C/TFN. I thought taking a different lens and maybe going back to our traditional roots might be a way that we can look at things in a healthier, more holistic way.**

**HAYDEN:** Something you discuss in the early part of your paper is the claim that we didn't really have mental health crises in our communities before colonization. It made me reflect on the many layers of this conversation. Is this collective mental health crisis a result of us not being able to practice more traditional forms of community? Or is it because I think we are in this new era of multi-level, bureaucratic governance that makes it impossible to resolve conflict? It's hard to pinpoint exactly what the cause is. How do you think through this complexity?

**ASHLEY:** For me, we now have a way that is very individual - 'this is my problem and I need to work through it. But I just hear, " don't worry about it". But culturally, we each had a role and we helped each other.

**When I was growing up, we relied on our neighbours, we relied on one another and we did everything together. You were not in it alone. Now I find that people do feel really alone. It's very isolating. When it comes to government, as a citizen, or a client, you're constantly working within policies and procedures that are very new and very foreign and you're just trying to get a simple thing done.**

But you've got to literally go through the system and then get redirected and get redirected and opened up again and again. Why are we even trying to do it if you've got to jump through all these hoops and retell your story 100 times 100 different people? Bringing back unity and ways of being together in our communities is really important.

**HAYDEN:** I really like this idea that you are describing in your paper, a sort of ground up community-based governance. Can you talk a little bit about that vision you have?

**ASHLEY:** Everyone has a voice and should be heard. Getting two minutes timed at a General Council meeting or some kind of venue like that within the First Nation isn't true community engagement. In our cultural ways everyone has a voice and everyone has something they can contribute. What will bring us together again is to run things from the ground up, doing things in circle, doing things like taking your time to actually listen and speaking to be heard - having people realize the potential in themselves and within their community while feeling valued. It can be seen as taboo to get whatever you need from the government. There's this sense of resentment so it's important to be able to work together with citizens in community and build together.

**HAYDEN:** What are your thoughts on the debate about the ability of Indigenous knowledge systems to accommodate the more bureaucratic, complex elements of governance?

**ASHLEY:** It starts with us and just for being able to run a meeting in circle and setting up guidelines beforehand. But you can continue to run meetings with that same group of people. If you're meeting monthly at Carcross/Tagish, there's meetings that happen very often, Executive Council, task groups, education, MOUs there's a lot of things that happen. Generally, all of those meetings do start with the check in. You go around and you set up your guidelines and then those guidelines will continue to be posted every meeting and you continue with that integrity. You hold yourself to those standards, and generally, when you're doing things in that kind of setting, you're able to work at a different capacity because it's consensus driven and you're coming to these things as a whole group. It's not that adversarial process of, top man down kind of stuff and just being flexible to work within a First Nation style of governance.

**"Experts" are flown in to communities a lot of the time to deal with tough things - often, things that you need certification or more schooling for. Coming in as an expert or a contractor means having to adjust. Working and collaborating with them is essential because we are the experts too; we are the experts on our land and in our field. How do we get to common ground together and break down bureaucratic barriers and this western style of how we work together? It's something that everyone individually has responsibility to uphold.**

**HAYDEN:** There are communities that are moving towards self government and there are a lot of academics that will say these new systems are inherently colonial. There is the perception that you may have more power to make decisions under these new arrangements, but you have to make those decisions Western frameworks. That can be a pretty divisive, and maybe even disempowering thing to say. I'm curious if you have thoughts about this: is the modern treaty an opportunity? Does the modern treaty allow for the process that you're describing, or does it hinder it?

**ASHLEY:** I feel that it is kind of both. But more so I'm finding that there's more openness to us doing this like pulling out our traditional stories and legends, coming up with Indigenous or traditional drafting legislation, and working with different agencies and different universities.

**The process is now more open to our assertion of this is how we live, these are our laws and if you're on our traditional territory, you can respect our laws and you can follow our guidelines on how we respect the land, how we respect the water, one another, and walk with dignity and pride.**

These discussions, with Canada, with Yukon and different agencies are happening. For example, they're working on BC treaties right now with the Dakká Nation, which is Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Teslin Tlingit Community Council and Taku River Tlingit First Nation. All three of these First Nations are working together to negotiate with BC and Canada, and that's pretty cool! In my current job, I'm learning that we do have the ability to draft cultural, traditional legislation that is based on our laws and our legends, and that they are receptive. The other governments are responding and working with us to understand where we're coming from a grassroots level.

**HAYDEN:** It's interesting because for the longest time, and I think into the present, the federal government they didn't want communities to work together. I think it is a really important step, to be able to convince the federal government and in the provinces in this case, that they should change the way that they approach things. I wonder if you could now, summarize your policy options that you proposed in the paper.

**ASHLEY:** There are three options. One of options is the Peacemaking Circle Training. Working in Peacemaking Circle Training is something that's happening within Carcross and it was one of the grand prize receivers of the AIP [Arctic Inspiration] prize in Ottawa. You can work with it, adapt it and mold it to what you're looking for. For example, building a program where you can bring in Elders and youth for connection and mentorship. You would encourage and foster those relationships by doing things such as getting out on the land and just being together in a different way. It can also be worked into schools and daycares.

**It can start being able to speak your voice and be heard from a young age, so that we don't end up at what the place that we've discussed, of all the feeling like, "I don't have a voice, I'll just keep this to myself, and I'll work it out on my own." Instead, you're encouraged to share and have a safe space to do that because you helped create that safe space.**

The second option is working with the Family Council to develop ways to work with families more personally, coming together and being able to involve your clan system. When you're within the clan system, you are able to rely on one another and have a system where you can pull on a person or persons to say, "I'm having a bad day, I might need more support today. I might need a fire. Can we go do something?" I think this one is happening, we're coming together a lot more. These two options, the peacemaking circle training and Family Council both bring back community. Coming back together as people; it's just more specific in the way that it's tracked.

The third option is nothing changes and there's no improvement. It will be a big expenditure on our systems. But not only that, more importantly, it's going to be our people that are suffering, continuing to go down this very one sided type of living and of governance.

**HAYDEN: Now that the paper has been released, have you had more discussions on the topic with people or seen any tangible changes happen?**

**ASHLEY:** I do feel that, personally, I'm more willing to show up and being in circle isn't as much of a trigger as it could be. Because when you're sitting in circle and you're speaking your truth and you're sharing, you're vulnerable. Who wants to sit there and be vulnerable with people that you've known your whole life? It's uncomfortable sometimes. Personally, I'm finding that there is more willingness to rather have a circle and get out these complex feelings or these disagreements, rather than going and sitting in HR across the desk from someone. It is small changes like this, that will make the big difference in the end. I'm also hoping that starting this mentorship program will be part of this change too. In our communities, we need support - our healthcare system, our education system.

**Our youth, they have the answers. Being able to empower and encourage them, and foster their growth is important. Our young leaders are the ones that are going to make this happen.**