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A Love Letter to Community: Reflections on Harm Reduction & Being Bad

by Veronica Fuentes

I LOVE PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS. I love them because they are world-builders, storytellers, caregivers, survivors, knowledge keepers, masters of mutual aid, land users, language speakers, artists and more. I love them in spite of the dominant narrative that they are none of these things. In Canada today, Indigenous people are viewed through the lens of many stereotypes, but they generally fall along the lines of "good" and "bad" Indians; this is a narrative that we, as Indigenous people, sometimes adopt and internalize.

The production and upkeep of moral labels are central to the colonial project, and we are seen as "bad" in the past, present, and future. These racist narratives say we do everything wrong: we don't know how to look after our children; we don't know how to handle money; we don't know how to "use" the land; we can't govern ourselves; and we can't seem to get sober. Indigenous Peoples know these stereotypes are not true, yet they control our lives.

We also know that the consistent policing of our people's placement on the "good" and "bad" spectrum is a practice that has been inevitably taken up by and against our own people. When we enforce these binaries of good and bad in our communities, it doesn't serve us. It further propels colonialism's mission to police and shame our bodies and behaviours. It is how we replicate colonial harms imposed upon us in our own way. But there is another way.

The Far End of Bad? Refusing The Narrative of Good/Bad Indians

I didn't grow up with "culture." For those of us who end up chasing culture, we often find that it tends to be conceptualized in somewhat conservative terms.

It becomes clear that sobriety is a part of the conversation, even pushed as crucial to being a "good" Indigenous person. In fact, sobriety is still often framed as the only pathway to healing, and the necessary trajectory to being the most traditional, the most sacred, and the most connected to spirit. As if decolonization and wellness are about returning to a pure (unattainable) past, rather than engaging with the complexity of our lived contemporary lives and imagining justice-oriented futures.

Sobriety culture does draw from important insights. For instance, as Anishinaabeg, we all have the responsibility to find meaning in our life. We must be accountable for ourselves, and we should always be walking in a good way. Each Nation has its own teachings about these ideas, but the message is consistent across territories. However, these principles are not conditional for sobriety, and are not unique to any one Indigenous experience. It would be wrong to assume that people who use drugs don't know about spirit. I would argue people who use drugs know better than most of us about taking care of each other, forgiveness, and the fragility of life.

For Indigenous Peoples, substance use often gets placed on the far end of bad on the good and bad spectrum. Most groups of people do not exist in this binary so firmly — if at all. People who use drugs are not bad; they are reflections of the diverse and multi-dimensional lives of Indigenous Peoples everywhere.

Yet even in the age of "reconciliation" and Indigenous resurgence, Indigenous drug users are still violently displaced out of our neighbourhoods, pushed into forced recovery and abstinence-based programs, and withheld necessary life-saving services.

Sobriety vs. Harm Reduction

Too often, we are encouraged to fantasize about Indigenous brilliance as frozen in time in the lives of our ancestors. Today, Indigenous Peoples are often perceived to be in a deficit compared to the rest of the world. Everywhere we go, colonial ideas of health are projected onto our communities and the way we live.

I don't feel like we are in a deficit, but that we are of great value. Our people are brilliant and have never stopped being brilliant. What's missed when we compare our expectations of Indigeneity today to an idyllic, unattainable past is that the brilliance that remains within us, that continues to persist in new ways, cannot be decontextualized from our ongoing settler colonial reality.

Indigenous people who use drugs are not void of this brilliance and value just because they use drugs. They have shown me brilliance through willful expressions of self-determination, compassion and life-saving creativity. In Edmonton, people who use drugs are often also first responders in emergencies, advocates for their loved ones, always sharing what they have and honouring kin when they pass.

Indigenous Peoples have a lot to teach the world about living a good life and living the life we all deserve. These teachers can also be people who use drugs.

The reality is that in the past we didn't face the same problems we do today. We did not have our people dying from preventable drug poisonings, police violence, or deaths related to houselessness. It is no secret that substance use is hugely relevant to Indigenous Peoples. But I question the supposed moral values (or lack thereof) placed on people who use drugs and what these assumptions achieve.

In 2018, I entered the settler-dominant world of non-profit, organizational harm reduction. Harm reduction was explained to me as "keeping people alive so that they have the opportunity to one day get sober." This definition assumes that Indigenous lives are only worth protecting if we're sober or committed to getting sober. I never felt this was a good enough pursuit for the context of freedom — unconditional and low barrier care — that I wanted to see on the ground.

Approaching drug use only with expectations to fulfill a linear timeline toward a final stage of healing (i.e. sobriety), is outdated and cruel. It doesn't consider substance use as the ever-moving variable it is, but instead insists control over people who use drugs. The stigmatization of substance use supports the carceral machines of white supremacy and colonialism; both insist our bodies are sick and work to criminalize and banish us from our homelands. But I've never thought of us as carceral Nations who dispose of our people. Anishinaabeg do not solve problems with unforgiving jails.

Harm reduction is an alternative to the discrimination, surveillance, and shame that have been forced on Indigenous Peoples for generations, which is now most forcefully felt by Indigenous people who use drugs.

Harm reduction isn't enabling drug users; it's keeping people alive because we love them, and that's what we have always done.

Currently, we are facing a massive systemic loss of our kin due to drug poisoning. In response to what we know about the realities of toxic drug supply, constricted access to safer use and denial of care for people who use drugs, harm reduction allows us to act in accordance with ancient beliefs of honouring our differences (gifts) and caring for each other. Indigenous Peoples possess a life-sustaining nature to our worldview, and this is why harm reduction is one of the most liberating and traditional concepts we can believe in.

The Indigenous Origins (and future) of Harm Reduction

Building healthy Indigenous futures requires us to refuse rigid pipedreams and demand pathways that don't leave people behind. Some of our people will never get sober. That doesn't mean they do not deserve to live the good life), or that we do not have a responsibility to better the material reality of people who use drugs.

We need a radical transformation of carceral drug policy to one that is rooted in a kinder, more generous interpretation of our Original Instructions already outlined in our creation stories, our Nēnapohs stories and our stories that tell us the dangerous imbalance and fragmentation that occurs when we are arrogant, selfish and unforgiving. We need to take an approach to people who use drugs that is informed by teachings of humility, bravery, love and respect. This means offering people who use drugs autonomy, safety, dignity, and recognition for their positive roles in our communities. We must confront the shame and guilt around substance use, as it is paralyzing our people into inaction. We must refuse the objective of sobriety as the holy grail. Culture, ceremony, and tradition have to be flexible and adapt to what is happening now. I believe we have it in us to mobilize around what we already know about care, to regenerate new ideas that serve Indigenous Peoples today, not just idealizations of the past.

Conflicting approaches to understanding drug use, of course, are tightly connected to grief, experiences of harm, and ongoing tragedies felt in our communities. These emergencies unfold differently on reserves and in urban communities, and despite differing approaches, we ultimately all want our loved ones to be safe.
My perspective is one developed from what my eyes and spirit see and feel in City Centre Edmonton, where the industry of Indigenous suffering is hostile, endless, and inescapable. With this experience comes the knowledge that, despite the harms they have brought, drugs aren't going away, and we can't stop people from using them.

What we can do is turn to harm reduction. We can call on our communities to embrace harm reduction as a reflection of our traditional ways.

When we don't champion harm reduction, it literally costs us our lives daily. When we don't push for safe supply, when we don't facilitate safe consumption. When we don't let substance users tell us what they need, it creates a quantifiable threat to our people's health. When we do not widen our understanding of the sacred and tap into the collective knowledge of drug users, we are turning our backs on our people.

Carceral, abstinence-based drug policies interfere with Indigenous lifeways, and there is nothing traditional about that. Creator still loves people who use drugs, and they will always be part of Creation. Harm reduction is a tool of compassion for putting our values into practice, mitigating harm and sustaining the life of people we love.

This Brief is the first publication in a new Yellowhead Special feature, Taking Care of Our Own: Perspectives on Indigenous-Led Harm Reduction. Produced by Kelsi Balaban, Community Engagement Specialist, and Sage Broomfield, Yellowhead Fellow, this feature amplifies perspectives on Indigenous harm reduction as a vital tool in taking care of our own, inextricable from the broader movement toward Indigenous sovereignty.

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