



## FILM REVIEW

### Elders' Room

Michael B. MacDonald (cinematographer), Shirley R. Steinberg (Writer and Director)  
Werkland School of Education: Michael B. MacDonald Films (2020)

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Michael MacDonald is a naturally enthusiastic Non-Indigenous man who has committed his creativity to answering the TRC's Calls to Action through witnessing and film. He describes some of the nature of his work as 'improvised ethno-fiction film making'.

In the film *Elders' Room* MacDonald is witness to the unpacking of residential school stories as well as thoughts from youth about racism and oppression they face told by those directly affected. The success of this video starts with the authenticity and generosity with which the stories are shared. Additional success is found in the spirit of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Indigenous voices are given space to both instruct the listener in how to hear Indigenous stories as well as how to respond respectfully in body and tone. A focus on intentional listening is introduced prior to any story telling. The film opens with an acknowledgment of the land and "stolen" territory, being the framework of treaty 7. A drum and song provide the introduction for a powerfully thoughtful 4 minutes of strength based imagery. The drum and images are instructional in their delivery and timing. There is learning on many layers both visually as well as lessons in time. Sitting and watching video in quiet contemplation is a lesson on how images trigger thoughts. The cadence of an Elder and the changing of a landscape both happen in a time that creates a spiritual space for contemplation. Like sitting in nature, our sense of time changes. If a settler can intently engage in this act, the lessons from the Elder will take root and can be transformative and instructive. The spirit of Indigenous film making would include time as a teacher.

A young woman named Carson begins with the confrontational statistic about the risks Indigenous women face around violence and murder. Her youth and the dramatic nature of the statistic are in painful contrast to each other. When the listeners' ears are most open, the most difficult modern issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women is presented in the film. This is a powerful use of timing and strong medicine for the settler's mind. It is a bitter and unsettling truth.

The next instructive segment sets the viewer up for how to listen. Elder gives teaching on how to have conversations from the heart. Elder Peter Weasel Moccasin exposes how dominant society comes with a power dynamic. This teaching is subtle and can be missed if the viewer is not intentionally listening.

Intent from the heart is the gateway to understanding. It is a clip that acts as a gateway to the articulate sharing that follows.

“Reconnect to the sacred way of the past.” (Elder Peter Weasel Moccasin, 2020)

I am left with a feeling of gratitude as I listen to those share their stories in the film. It is painful to share traumatic events and in a way is cause for the brain to re-live them in part. To have someone share their story is a powerful gift. We should be instantly grateful for the willingness of Indigenous people to share so freely. These stories are recorded for settler unsettling and healing, as Non-Indigenous people have been dominant in the power dynamic that we hear these stories.

Video is one powerful way for oral story sharing to be shared. Is anything lost when not in person? Is anything gained by the share-ability of video for modern storytelling?

This film is an example I will keep of successful ally-ship in film making. Michael the witness allows his voice to be silent as he allows us to be witnesses. Michael stated that his motive is to share these stories. He searches for stories that are personally close to him as well as stories that are not already being told. He acknowledges that he is a Non-Indigenous person working alongside Indigenous people and as he speaks of his careful approach his face lights up. He is clearly comfortable letting the land, and people speak for themselves and this provides me with a powerful case study for careful ally-ship. Video can make a record of us spending time together in space and time. Video is inherently relational, and it is easily shared on modern storytelling platforms like Facebook and YouTube/Vimeo and other user generated sites. Video is a powerful tool for witnessing and requires great trust and collaboration.

Early in MacDonald's filmmaking career an Elder gave advice and a lesson to MacDonald. He stated that the reasons Non-Indigenous people are seeking Indigenous stories is because we do not know our own story. The Elder went on to say that If we knew our own backgrounds and connections to the land then we would tell those stories. Indigenous people do not need settlers to tell their story (MacDonald, 2020). This illustrates an important first step in ally-ship, deep listening. This teaching left a silence on the group MacDonald was talking to, as we each thought about what ally-ship looks like. We are reminded that it is only when intently listening takes place that relationships can form. Deep listening creates a space and a time where authentic sharing takes place. In the film *Elders' Room*, Elder Peter speaks carefully and authentically about his people and his past.

MacDonald's work records this careful and authentic speaking in a similar spirit of witnessing in the film *Unspittable*, where the viewer is invited into the private and close proximity of a car with the 3 members of the Hip Hop group *Unspittable*. The viewer becomes witness thorough Michael's camera as ally and silent witness.

### **Ally-ship and deep listening**

The power of film to education and healing is reliant on the collaboration between those teaching and sharing and those witnessing. But this authentic sharing is only possible when individuals who are present have done the inner work of quieting the inner thoughts in preparation to listen. This is represented in the introduction in the film where time is offered to prepare the viewer to listen carefully.

I present three simple steps for a settler to follow to begin the life-work of ally-ship;

1. I promise to listen,
2. I promise not to interrupt,
3. I promise to speak well of you in your absence.

From a settler's perspective it comes down to understanding how to witness without interrupting. The cadence of nature and an Elder's story can help calibrate our thoughts to listen for learning. Michael B. MacDonald's collaborative Ethno-graphic films can also teach us to listen as witnesses. In the film *Unspittable* the viewer is allowed to sit close with the film's subjects. The camera acts as a friend who shares large swaths of time. Michael is clearly that friend and ally but he is silent and in so much as he is quiet, the authentic voices of the individuals become the only subject of the film. The imposition of the artist is consistent with a 'leave no trace' attitude. Settlers and non-Indigenous people can now witness alongside the participants of *Elders' Room* the sharing that took place.

MACDONALD, M.B., (2020). Zoom Call. *Curriculum as Possibility*. EDER 693.19 Shirley Steinberg. Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, July 2020.

*Elders' Room*. Film in collaboration. Directed by Shirley Steinberg. Canada: Michael B. Macdonald Films, 2020.

*Unspittable*. Film in collaboration. Directed by Michael Macdonald. Canada: Michael B. Macdonald Films, 2019.