

# Embrace the responsibilities that come with relationships

BY PETER FERGUS-MOORE

ONE day, years ago, I was asked to do a smudging at the Lakehead Adult Education Centre. The person requesting this knew that I had the responsibility of an eagle feather and felt that her students needed this ceremony.

Full disclosure: I am a white, Anglo-Saxon middle-aged male, and I was asked in the Anishnawbe way with tobacco to perform this rite. Surrounded by Indigenous literacy students in a traditional circle, I began it with a question that you the reader might have right now: what is a white guy doing with an Indigenous artifact like an eagle feather and presiding over an Indigenous ceremonial smudge? You are right to ask, given the cultural appropriation incidents that have recently popped up everywhere like mushrooms after a rain.

At that time, I was the co-ordinator of adult literacy, the Anishnawbe Skills Development Program, at the (then) Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centre. Part of my work was involvement in the umbrella group, the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC), as a board member. It was rewarding and illuminating to be involved with adult literacy instructors from all over the province, share ideas and heartaches, support one another, and lobby our provincial government to improve chronic underfunding and, it must be said, relative ignorance of our everyday realities.



ONE CITY,  
MANY VOICES

**The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.**

Most of the literacy programs in the Coalition had the responsibility of an eagle feather, a sacred trust. The eagle feather was thought to be like a compass needle in a sense, a way of guiding the programs and those involved to do the right thing in the right way — in a good spirit, if you will. It was present at all meetings of the Coalition, just as our individual eagle feathers were brought to ceremonies at our individual programs.

Not surprisingly, the Coalition itself had the responsibility of a feather. And during my sojourn as a board member, a problem arose. The board member who carried the Coalition's feather could no longer bear the responsibility for it, and had surrendered it to the remaining board members. For one reason and another, the other board members could not or would not take on carrying the feather. I was asked if I would. I promised to think about it, and as there was no one else to carry it at the

time, agreed to do so. It stayed with our program here in the Lakehead.

For an uneasy few months, I bore the responsibility of the feather's care and safekeeping, all the while thinking that I was not qualified for this task. And then one day, at a conference here involving all the adult literacy programs in the province, I was seated at the same table as an Ojibwe elder, Jim Chicago. Generously, he offered to provide an answer for a question from each of us around the table. My burning question was the whole matter of a non-Indigenous person having the care of an eagle feather.

"Whose hands was it put into?" he asked.

"Mine," I said.

"And who is carrying it now?" he asked.

"I am," I answered.

"Then you are the one responsible for it," he said firmly. "It is for you to look after."

A few months later, I was able to hand over the Coalition's eagle feather to one who would carry it responsibly, and frankly, I was relieved to do so.

It seems to me that the right relationship is part of our collective responsibility as exemplified by the eagle feather.

*Peter Fergus-Moore is an author and retired adult literacy co-ordinator from the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.*