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## The Unlearning: Deconstructing Fear and Insecurities

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In my dream, I saw my uncle's house. My parents used to visit my uncle often and we'd go to his house. It was old, dank, and never seemed to have any light inside. I was always afraid when I had to go to this place. During my first visit to Dreamer's Rock, the memory of this place came to me. In my dream I had sketched this house many, many times. I saw dozens of sketches. When I told my teacher what I saw, she asked me what I thought it meant. I told her. "It is my home, inside. It is how I feel about my own sense of security and love." She nodded in agreement.

—Amy Desjarlais, *Starblanket* (2014, p. 139)

This piece will focus on communicating about my healing journey. Rather, my "unlearning."

I ask the questions: "How do I make myself heard to the western medical community in a way that is easy to understand?" Medical practitioners

are people who have dedicated their lives to learning, who have filled themselves with many different medical practices, terminologies, and methodologies designed to save lives, to heal our physical bodies. Western medical doctors are the people who many of us visit when we hurt; when our bodies are broken. What happens though, when the hurt is invisible? When our spirit is broken? When intangible life energy drains our will to live? How do we heal our spirit? Whom do we visit?

### **Reconnection**

I see myself as a spiritual being who often uses dreams as a way to interpret subconscious messages and move toward self actualization. Reflecting back on the process of unlearning trauma, I see that it was sparked by my first visit to the fasting grounds at Dreamer's Rock and the subsequent conversation with my teacher; it seems like eons ago. I was a different person then. One thing has remained the same. I respect the messages contained in my dreams. I trust them. The sketches I discuss in this article were drawn between 2009 and 2011. In 2009, I had just reconnected with my artwork. While I enjoyed the process of creation, I have never taken formal training in art. At the beginning of my healing journey, I found it necessary to use artwork to explore and express my innerworld. I enjoyed the challenge of trying to draw a feeling, an idea, or the images I saw in the back of my mind. By releasing feelings and emotions through my art, I saw my subconscious begin to emerge. At the same time as

I was connecting to my art, I was also learning how to connect and recognize my emotions. I had never consciously been aware of my emotions, nor had I ever learned how to identify what I was feeling when I was feeling an emotion. So I was building an entirely new process of expression. My early teachings indicate that negative emotions that are not expressed or transformed continue to sit as dormant energy within the body and eventually contribute to detrimental physical ailments.

### **The Fasting Ceremony**

Fasting ceremonies differ from teacher to teacher. It takes many years of studying for a fast conductor to learn how to conduct the fasting ceremony. The fasting ceremony is said to be a spiritual journey. Individuals forego food and water for a predetermined amount of time and enter ceremony as a way to reconnect with their inner self. They are visiting the spirit world, and, in fact, have become spirits themselves. Fasting helpers continually visit the individual who is doing their fast in order to provide guidance or assistance throughout the ceremony. Ceremonies often last from one to four days, sometimes longer.

### **The Sketches**

This series of pieces was completed over a period of two years. During that time a prominent grandmother and elder in the community took me under her wing. Lillian Pitawanakwat became my teacher. I had the dream of my Uncle's house that first night on Birch Island. I had camped on the

fasting grounds. While I ended up being a helper during my first visit to Dreamer's Rock, I received a great deal of guidance from the vision of my uncle's house. My first fasting ceremony occurred a year later.

I don't remember very much of my childhood, though from what I am told our home was very troubled. I grew up in an alcoholic home. Often there were drunken parties where strangers would troop through our house. Most of my early life, I have the feeling I tried to be invisible, the least threat. This invisibility started when I was seen by a relative and was molested. Giiwabama [You are seen] I began to hide.

—Amy Desjarlais, *Emptying the Cup*, (2012, p. 23)

It was also during this time that I began learning cultural teachings, and I began the work of healing childhood trauma. In May 2009, I had been working as manager of a cultural facility called Dodem Kanonhsa' (Clan Lodge). I had just moved to Toronto following a devastating breakup. I was a recovering co-dependent and newly single mother in a strange city. I had no family and no close friends nearby. I found that I was thirsty for the traditional teachings of our elders, and I immersed myself in learning. I attended many open teachings and individual appointments with elders. I joined weekly hand-drum circles and attended talking circles facilitated by community grandmothers. While

I enjoyed the teachings, I also did the work on myself. I continued to sketch and, through the process of expressing myself, was able to visualize the emotional and spiritual journey I had embarked upon.

I found that I began to practise many of the cultural teachings the elders were sharing, such as smudging, drumming, and carrying a small medicine pouch on my person. These practices were grounding, and material representations for the knowledge I now embodied as a result of replacing negative habits.

### **The First Piece:**

**May 16, 2009**

This piece speaks to the conversation I had with grandmother Lillian Pitawanakwat that year; it is a crude representation of my uncle's house. This was the first time I realized that the

foundation of my early life created many insecurities. I acknowledged how fear dominated my life. By acknowledging the message contained in this vision, I was able to understand how fear underscored the many aspects of my life that prevented me from fully enjoying it and embracing love in all forms.

The house in this sketch is dark, old, and worn down. I described the house in my dream as dank,



dark, and that it “never seemed to have any light inside.” If we relate the sense of security to a tangible symbol, the home is the place where you can feel most like yourself. A home is the most safe and secure place possible in your waking life. In this sketch, the house from my dream does not seem very secure. The darkness in the sketch could signify a great deal of negative or dark emotions. Emotions like fear, shame, sadness, loneliness, and insecurity. This awareness of the inner realm shed light on the mechanisms of insecurity and fear, providing me with an array of relationships and fundamental bonds that needed to be deconstructed piece by piece. Essentially, I had to unlearn what I had learned about love and security.

You will notice that the tree is very prominent, situated in the foreground of the piece. Like the house, the tree is also dark, a little twisted, and essentially lifeless. The tree could represent knowledge or family and ancestry. The bushes around the home are unkempt and growing wild, the front steps are decayed and askew. The lawn is unmanicured, the home is not well cared for. Metaphors shown in the piece are indicative of the self-perception of the artist. Not well cared for, in disarray, surrounded with much darkness or negativity.

**The Second Piece:  
August 23, 2009**

The next piece illustrates that the process of deconstruction has begun. The house from my dream no longer appears fearful. It is sketched in the same location as the initial piece, though the house is no longer dark and scary. The empty frame of the home is now light, airy, and flooded with movement. The work I was doing in my waking life seems to have given me the added confidence to begin deconstructing the dark, dank place within. As a standalone, this piece could also be mistaken for construction. One might wonder why only the frame exists. Why did the artist leave the building unfinished? This piece represents that (de)construction is incomplete, a work in progress. It was during this time that I also began to acknowledge, accept, and process the experiences associated with childhood traumas. I began the process of forgiveness.

You will notice the tree still remains dark, twisted, and lifeless though the pencil strokes are not as pronounced as the previous piece; making the tree look a bit lighter. More of the tree and area surrounding the house can be seen. The land looks very well kept in this piece. The bushes at the front of the home have been replaced by even pencil strokes that could represent earth or a short, well-manicured lawn. Even though the frame of



the house indicates empty space, the background and surrounding area do not show through the framework, this area remains blank, almost as a “space-holder,” although it throws a shadow, as evidenced on the lower right area of the home. The shadow that this empty frame throws is uniform and even. The shadow is not at all frightful, but indicates balance.

**The Third Piece:  
September 7, 2009**

This piece is again similar to the previous one; however, we see the house is completely deconstructed. The land has returned to a very natural looking state. The tree also looks very natural; while the branches are still devoid of life, the perspective reveals more of the tree. It is a very



large, very old tree. Perhaps the tree is indicative of a long line of knowledge and ancestry. The frame of the house has been replaced with something that appears as a natural clearing among the grassy brush. This piece is created using light pencil strokes with gentle pressure. It appears the darkness has been replaced with a lovely, natural looking retreat. A small clearing where one might enjoy a nice picnic or it could be a place to enjoy sitting in contemplation. In my waking life, I began hand drumming and had continued to attend the talking circles. I had received my spirit



name and I'd attended the fasting grounds more than once. I had also begun confronting and working through identity issues as part of my work in my master's program. As a standalone sketch, one might find this piece a very comforting and enjoyable scene.

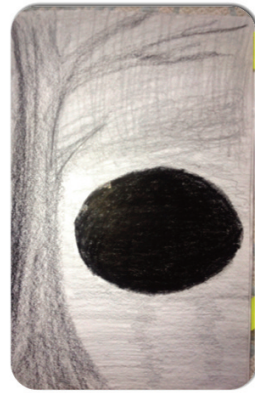
**The Fourth Piece:  
February 28, 2010**

In this piece we see a dark circular object. The dark shape is deliberate, prominent, and controlled. The tree in this sketch is very light; all darkness has been removed from it.

The eye seems captivated by the circle; the shape appears well formed.

This piece speaks to the process of rebuilding. The oval shape represents the beginnings of a sweatlodge. The darkness is freshly exposed earth. I began the process of relearning what "love" and "security" mean to me and my overall well-being. I was learning how to become more grounded in the present and less overwhelmed with fear, shame, and insecurity.

This piece is indicative of a renewed sense of security and balance. The formal and rigid square-shaped house has been replaced by a circle. This is also a visual representation of my journey back to my Indigenous roots and culture. As a standalone piece one may wonder what the circle represents. Some may feel frightened at the large black circle,



and it may appear out of place in the clearing. During this time, I had been incorporating traditional healing ceremonies, such as the cedar bath, incorporating guided meditation, and continuing my inner-child work. This piece illustrates a very deliberate choice, centring on circular thought, tendencies, and practices. We can see that much of the former wild and unruly vegetation has been replaced by the grassy clearing, indicative of more conscious intention toward self-care.

**The Fifth Piece,  
May 2, 2011**

This final piece incorporates the tree. Once again, more of the trunk is revealed and there is also a new perspective of the circular object. The grasslands have disappeared. Within the whitespace, we



see a new structure, an oval with archways representing the inner foundation of a sweatlodge. Surrounding the sweatlodge we can see many different images. Near the top we see seven shapes that resemble human torsos, shoulders and heads; these seven beings represent many things; the seven generations that came before me, as well as the seven generations that will follow me, they represent the seven grandfather teachings, seven stages of life, and seven directions. These people

represent my ancestry. Below that in the clockwise direction we see two paw prints (one large and one small) representing bears as my spirit helpers and my healing nature; we see another circular shape known as the Ourobouroos, or the snake eating its tail which represents rebirth and unity; we also see a small campfire representative of the Three Fires Confederacy of the Anishinaabeg people; at the bottom right we see the figure of a White Raven head, indicative of my spirit name; above the Raven we see a small round object representative of the astrological sign of Taurus; finally in the top right corner of the piece, we see a small animal representing the beaver—my clan animal which defines my place in the community. Beavers are said to be warriors and master strategists. Beaver clan members work to build strong, healthy communities. All of these depictions are a result of connecting with my higher self and the Great Kind Mystery (Gzhe Manidoo).

It was during this time that I had been processing the deaths of my parents in 2010. As a result of this process, I had embraced more fully my Indigenous cultural teachings, established a blog writing routine, and welcomed the awareness that the unconditional love received from my parents has been replaced by the supportive nature of my culture, ancestors, spiritual guides, and helpers. I was learning how to deal with depression and beginning the process of parenting myself through the different crises I found myself in. I was learning how to discover my relationship with my spirit helpers and building an intangible support net-

work by establishing relationships with all of these helpers. With these many new areas of awareness and enlightenment, we can see a lighter representation of intangible supports.

### **Conclusion**

The elders I worked with at Dodem Kanonhsa' (Clan Lodge) say that Indigenous teachings are a "way of life," one cannot separate the knowledge from the people and the practices contained within. There is an intricate web of relationships between spirit, ancestral work, dreams, and the tangible world. While our bodily needs can be adequately cared for by physicians or healers in the community, our spiritual needs also require deliberate inner work. These pieces of artwork are a small homage to the teachers who helped me to understand that I have everything I need within myself to perform the delicate work of transforming negative inner thoughts to a positive, loving, and more secure outlook.

Since the final piece was complete, I have found many valuable tools within my culture to assist in processing negative emotions or stress, which improves my overall well-being and health. I have found many intangible methods that I can use to process intangible hurts. I have since incorporated a variety of different tools such as writing, dancing, ceremony, and drumming in order to process negativity, and to continuously promote a positive mindset and healthy, balanced lifestyle.

I became aware of self-determined definitions of "love" and "security," which enhanced my self-

confidence and self-esteem. By working through my childhood traumas with skilled guides in the form of Indigenous elders, healers, and energy workers, and expressing the journey through my art, I found a welcoming and supportive foundation for my journey through the darkness—all of which enabled me to have the confidence to persevere through the deconstruction process and come to an understanding of universal love. Self-love eventually replaced my deepest fears and insecurities and brought a greater sense of inner peace, and confidence.

## References

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