

I Did Something Stupid as a Teenager: Bodily Possession, Walking Corpses, a Dog's Sixth Sense, and Anishinaabe Land-Based Recovery

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Abstract

First Nations, Metis, and Inuit ways of knowing have always drawn knowledge from the land and the internal realms of self or feeling to guide and heal. Teenage self-harm and turmoil resulting from the generational trauma of colonialism serve as a reflexive case study for understanding how Anishinaabe ideologies around land-based well-being are applicable in the instances following an overdose. This project is an interpretive phenomenological analysis of a reflexive recount of the author's overdose as an urban Anishinaabe teenager. Utilizing First Nation's theories and teachings on land-based wellbeing as a framework, this text unpacks the unexplained events of an overdose with Anishinaabe worldviews in mind. Storytelling techniques such as self and situational reflection are used to communicate data (the experience) in a creative way unconventional to colonial research structures, and better aligned with the author's ancestral practices. This is a creative project in self-reflection, trauma exploration through Indigenous frameworks, and communication removed from colonial conventions. This project serves as illuminating towards urban Indigenous challenges which acts as a case for understanding Anishinaabe knowledge of self thriving.

Keywords

Storytelling, First Nation, Anishinaabe, wellbeing, substance abuse, overdose, reflexivity, teenage, paranormal, land-based, family, death



Inexplicability in the Meaningless and Reflexive Storytelling Design

When asked about a life-changing paranormal experience, I think about the scariest experience I have ever had. This experience was damaging yet necessary for altering the course of my life. I consider it paranormal due to the unfolding of events, some may consider the nature of this experience to be nothing more than the manipulation of the brain and the logical consequences which follow. With perhaps coincidence sprinkled in and around the manipulation and its consequences. This is the story of my overdose at the age of 16, one week before my 17th birthday. I was on a poor course of life, one which was setting me up for severance from my family by way of self-inflicted hardship. This experience came at such a time and with such unnegotiated force that it demanded me to change my ways by showing me the value of life and the profound depth to which my life is connected to the world and unseen realms of life around me. Though I did not fully understand or have the words to describe what happened to me and what I experienced accurately, I knew it was profound. Currently, I still struggle emotionally with recounting my experience; studying and becoming familiar with ontological and spiritual ideologies stemming from my Anishinaabe ancestry has helped me grapple with and assign meaning to what nearly killed me and the reasons why I survived.

This essay will reference First Nations' ideologies around land-based spirituality, healing, and wellness since these ideas are ones which now effectively frame my experience and flesh out reasons why my overdose so profoundly redirected the course of my life. An initial written construction of events will be followed by their connections to feelings of the inexplicable or paranormal. These recountings and establishments of paranormal elements or happenings will be analyzed through Indigenous texts centered on healing and spirituality as it is connected to the land in interpretive phenomenological analysis. I will construct and recount events of their lived experience, analyzing and understanding it with assistance from guiding theories, effectively conducting an interpretive phenomenological analysis of an internalized and individual experience. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a method of understanding a person's experience and the significance that a person assigns to their own experience. This analysis method is appropriate for this project as it allows room for data such as self-perception and feelings toward a specific experience to be included in the full breadth of the project. Indigenous theories and literature which connect and illuminate in these ways are important, despite this profound experience being one largely of the individual-internal. This internal experience communicated with the unseen realms of life, for example, spirit realms and realms of energy within the land, in a way which allowed greater insights

into the nature of relationality outside of the individual self. An understanding of relationality between self and the varying realms of life is foundational in many Indigenous viewpoints and ways of knowing. The discussion of this project will explore how the fallout of the overdose has altered the course of my life; through this exploration, I will also touch on ways the paranormal has been baked through my adult life following this experience. Answering the question, 'How has land-based ancestral knowledge of well-being contributed to one's recovery from substance abuse?'

This study has a root practice in discourse creation through storytelling, followed by an analysis and study of discourse realized through Anishinaabe ideologies. As a communication study, this project takes an untraditional course as it is both a practice of creating a communications artifact and then turning critically on that artifact within the same project. Though this story is the recount of events which exist in memory, its manifestation in an academic project is a practice of active discourse creation and dissemination. The analysis portion of this project, though it reflects on my memory, is an analysis of the written discourse produced early in the project. Though this study does not place a theoretical primacy in understanding the function of discourse, as a traditional communications outlook may call for, this study utilizes Anishinaabe understandings of wellness to pull apart the discourse of an overdose and understand and thus construct further understanding of events, contributing to existing discourse. This project utilizes my academic background in communications to inform the composition of storytelling and the analysis of creative constructs.

What Happened? The Overdose.

A week before my 17th birthday, my dad was away working overnights, and my mum was with the rest of our family on our ancestral lands in Ontario. At this point in my life, I had lost sight of my direction and purpose. The colonial world, which can be thought of as an unseen space centered around assimilation and capitalist expansion and its multiplicity of hierarchical systems, had asked me to remove myself from a meaningful lifeway. I complied. However, my purpose and direction are intrinsic to my spiritual nourishment and the powerful yet non-physical ties between myself, my family, and my ancestors. Colonialism and its many systems asked me, as it has asked many Indigenous individuals, to separate from these ties and your purpose because you are easier to control with no roots in solid ground. When I had lost sight of these ties and no longer deeply understood their value in my life, I began to use drugs and seek out people who believed money, and what it could buy, was more worthy than the unseen nourishment and teachings of my family ties: people who fed my bad habits. It was with these people with whom I spent the most time. I

effectively used them and the drugs as a wedge between my family, direction, and self because I had been told to believe this was where I was best aligned. My spirituality and its thrivance held no value, so when my parents were preoccupied and I was out of view a week before my 17th birthday, I decided then would be the perfect opportunity to get high undisturbed by caring eyes.

I was completely alone, sitting at a desk, waiting for some unreliable friend to join me. I put the sheet in my mouth, administering a dose an hour before they showed up. It tasted bitter, and I did not feel safe, but I held it anyway, convinced that my intuition meant nothing. By the time my friend showed up and took their dose, the sheet had nearly dissolved to nothing in my mouth, and the experience began and escalated quickly. I then knew what I had taken was poison and that this was going to hurt, so I told my friend to spit out what they had taken. For me, it was already too late. I went blind, I went deaf, yet I was reportedly up talking and walking around, but my consciousness was in another place. I was gone for twelve hours, and I had lost all my senses. It was like my body was now a vessel or a puppet to the drugs I had taken, and my spirit had gone elsewhere. When my body was up and running around the house, I remember being in a dark pit and feeling an evil presence with me. I remember witnessing and being conscious of a sea of black. I knew I was dying if I was not already dead. I woke up in bed with my friend at my feet. It was like a fever had broken. I felt completely sober, but almost like I was a ghost. Nothing felt real, and my house felt very artificial. I knew where my family was, and I knew they had no plans to come home, but I became very concerned about where they were. I needed them to come home, so I began calling all of them and asking where they were and who they were with, asking them to come home and telling them I loved them. I changed out of the clothes I had overdosed in and laid down in a room I had not been in during the experience. I was convinced the energy and entity associated with the overdose was like a pungent smell, and it soaked into everything I touched during it. I needed to get away because I was terrified of it.

My dog was in the house with me during my overdose, according to my friend, I had picked her up and sought comfort or a sort of forgiveness from her. My dog had witnessed what had happened to me; she had seen me pass away. I feel it is important to note that this experience revealed something about animals to me: their incredible sense of being in touch with the unseen realms of energy that permeate all life and witnessing the realm of the spirit in a way. Many hours after my overdose, I saw my dog again. I sat down on a chair in the kitchen and called her towards me, but she would not come. She stood at the end of the hallway and watched me with some fear. I grabbed her bag of treats and offered some, with much time and reluctance, she slowly came

towards me with her tail between her legs to accept the treat, then quickly ran off. I was initially confused but then quickly understood her hesitancy. She knew that I was not there, she knew she was accepting a treat from a fresh walking corpse. She had watched my soul depart from my body and effectively die. This overdose was the closest thing I have experienced to possession. My body was no longer mine, and my dog was the only other being who could agree with me.

I tried to drink water, but my body would not accept it, and the water would come out. I drank so much water, but my body remained dehydrated. My body would not accept food. Rather, I wished to smell and be surrounded by it but not consume it. When I lay, I felt the blood rush to the back of my skull and the side of my body closest to the ground. I felt it swish and rock inside me when I would roll over. When I looked in the mirror, my skin was white and swollen. It looked as though my skin was no longer attached to my face and may slough off at any minute. I had lost most of the feeling in my skin, it was numb or pins and needles all over. My brain was shot; I struggled to do basic math and think with any coherence. I could not sleep, so I spent the next day admiring old photos of myself, finally recognizing how beautiful I had been. I admired the art I had made; I was amazed at what I had once been able to create. It was like looking at myself in the third person; I was no longer able to identify with the girl in those pictures and the things she had made. Rather, I was saying goodbye to her and admiring her beauty. I did not sleep for three days because I was afraid that if I closed my eyes, my body would stop before my mother came home and I was able to say goodbye. My family came to see me over the days following my accident. Mostly upset with what I had done, they slowly became solemn and afraid once I had disclosed all I was hiding and witnessed my body's inefficiency to function.

Once my mother was home, I could apologize and tell her I loved her. After this, I felt the need to drink water again, and this time the water stuck. I do not know how to describe it, and this is kind of gross, but this detail signalled a crucial turning point in the experience. I drank so much water, and I peed, properly peed, it was dark and ridiculous! But my body had finally flushed out whatever was residing within me; the colour and elasticity of my skin instantly began to return. It was like life was breathed back into my body after being a corpse melting into a bed. My organs began to function again, and I knew I was going to live. Then and there, I knew I had been given a second chance, and whatever entity I had invited into my life during my drug use was angry. I did not die, but it was warded away and suppressed from my body. My dog would finally come to see me, tail wagging, and I knew then that I must reinvent myself from the ground up: model myself

after the child I had once been who knew my place alongside my family, the unapologetic child I was before the colonial world had broken me down.

I knew whatever entity was with me in my overdose and possessed my body was angry and wanted me dead because it tried to distract me from my family. During phone calls with my family, it would make sounds of strung out and grumbling through the phone, and my calls would drop for seemingly no reason. It tried to prevent me from connecting with them. Abusers and people who had harmed me in the past tried to get in contact with me during the days following; people who had not spoken to me in years were trying to get back into my life. It was upset I did not die and was trying to draw me back into death while I was still vulnerable.

Once I knew I was going to live, my body still struggled. Doctors would not help me, but I am certain I died of a heart attack during my overdose. In the months that followed, I would wake up in the middle of the night with searing and shooting pains in my chest. I could not eat anything salty or spicy without heart palpitations and tightness in my upper back and chest. I had to be kind and gentle with myself so I could heal, so I could live. I only wanted to be outside and listen to the birds and see the plants. It was the middle of winter but I was grateful to feel the cold on my skin and to be able to hear and see the world around me, really see it. I still have heart palpitations. Stopping the pain in my chest took years of healing, and I suspect I will never fully recover. I have a weak heart, which sometimes burns after a stressful day. In ways like this, I know I will one day have to face the entity which wanted my death, it has permanently scarred me. But so long as I fulfill my responsibility to myself, the people around me, and the physical as well as the unseen realms, I know that I can trust in what may happen to me in death. Now, I do not fear death. I do not know what will happen at my end, but I know my spirit will not be lost, and there is a place for me to reintegrate into all things.

Where is the ‘Paranormal’ Present?

I consider this experience one of the paranormal for three key reasons: the entity which made its presence known to me, the difference in experience from that of my consciousness and my external body, and my dog’s reaction to the experience. Redvers, in her (2020) article *“The land is a healer”*: *Perspectives on land-based healing from Indigenous practitioners in Northern Canada* described ‘land-based’ in healing and cultural practice as “a reminder of humanity’s fundamental and inherent connection with the natural world and was agreed upon as a common English term across all regions for cross-cultural dialogue... This culturally-infused term differentiated the concept from

western-based conceptions of nature, which were seen to approach humans and the land as separate entities” (p. 95). Here, an understanding of a middle ground or connecting force between a human individual and all things is established. We are the same as nature and not categorically different as colonial ideology may have us believe. There are indeed connecting and shared forces between us and the differing realms of life which deem us more like family than we could possibly imagine. I pose that this connecting aspect is the realm of the soul or energy, this existence of an unseen realm creates a common theme in the three aspects of my experience, which may be deemed paranormal. It makes sense that my dog would be in touch with the happenings of this unseen realm because, despite living in colonial Canada, my dog’s internal and spiritual realm is untouched by the effects of colonialism, which asks us to ignore our attachments to the paranormal. If there were to be a drastic change in my relation to this realm or a disruption by introducing an evil presence, my dog would be more inclined to recognize it than I or others around me. Nightingale and Richmond’s (2022) article *Reclaiming Land, Identity and Mental Wellness in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Territory* says this about Anishinaabe wellness concerning the realms of life, including animals;

According to the Anishinaabe philosophy of mino-bimaadiziwin, living in a good and healthy way involves sustaining relationships of reciprocity and responsibility with all living things, including humans, animals, spirit, and future generations. Through the individual and communal protocols required to maintain these relationships, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness of communities is strengthened. In return, the land upholds its own responsibilities by providing the gifts necessary for living well. The land is thus more than a physical landscape or the location of material resources for survival. It is the source of Indigenous knowledge that guides communities’ social, political, ceremonial, and everyday practices, and shapes Anishinaabe culture and identity (p. 1).

We can establish from this that relationships and responsibility to all entities of life (like my dog) serve beneficial and vital roles in the lifeways of humans. Broadly speaking, it could be argued that all life entities serve vital roles to one another and that one cannot truly achieve wellness without the other. Redvers includes animals as serving crucial roles in the definition of essentialist ‘land-based’ ideology; “Relationship with the land is a central feature or concept rooted in Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy. Land-based implies a deep connection with and non-separation between human beings and the natural world. A reference to land includes all aspects of the natural

world: plants, animals, ancestors, spirits, natural features, and environment (air, water, earth, minerals)” (2020, p. 90). In many ways, the reactions and interactions with my dog indicate the state of my relationship to the connective energy of all realms and the land.

When my consciousness or ‘internality’ was separated from my external form in the period following the overdose, I experienced extreme physical unwellness followed by an extended period of recovery. During this period of recovery, I found solace in nature, in closeness with my family, and a profound appreciation for the functioning of my senses. I imagine these practices rebalanced my ‘internal realm’ (related to the soul, affective self, and identity of self) with the ‘external’ (physical or tangible realms) and brought my spirit back into alignment with wellness from the physical displacement it experienced during my overdose and circumstances precluding it. Nightingale and Richmond highlight how land-based healing contributes to wellness for spirituality by balancing individuals with all realms of life; “Access to land is essential for food security, physical activity, medicines, and environmental resources that support healing and physical wellbeing. Equally important, however, the land provides the space for learning and teaching Indigenous knowledge through intergenerational relationships” (2022, p. 2). Furthermore, this article understands the land and its integrated practices as being “where families and communities gather to fulfill their responsibilities, practice their skills, and connect with each other in ways that foster confidence, belonging, pride, and social support.” (2022, p. 2). Healing from my experience involved recognizing nature, my family, and my relations to the spirit realms through grappling with unseen realms of natural energy in the face of my mortality. “Being on the lands of one’s ancestral territories simultaneously links community members with their ancestors and future generations, and reinforces the spiritual relatedness between humans and all of creation” (Richmond, 2022, p. 2). It can be argued the ways in which I reclaimed my spirit and participated in recovery following my experience are aligned with land-based healing methods. Though I was not aware of it at the time, I was simply in the position to address my needs as I felt they were needed for my survival and eventual thriving. This included reconnection to my family and participation in land-based activities with effects similar to those described by Nightingale and Richmond. There could be something paranormal about this as viewed from a Western standpoint, as land-based healing methods address feelings as rational knowledge, view non-human realms as kin, and look to the land for the wellness of both the physical and the spiritual. Though Indigenous scholarship handling land-based wellness and healing does not hold all the answers or terms for describing the entirety of my experience, it does provide a framework for understanding the significance and logic behind the proceedings of events. Utilizing

these ideologies has also helped me keep on course with a healthy life and maintain a responsibility to my family and the realms of life and land, which I must steward or, at the bare minimum, respect and recognize as living entities.

Persisting Impacts

This brings me to discuss how the paranormal of this experience continues to impact and shape my life into adulthood. My overdose, the paranormal happenings and the entities which surrounded it formed such a jarring experience that revealed the existence of realms and responsibilities with which I had previously lost touch. This experience, in many ways, asked me to realign myself on a better path or to die young for no reason. It also made it very clear to me that if I continued to live and even if I died, there are systems in nature which would support my spirit and care for my physical form either way. This experience's ability to remind me of my responsibility and role to my family was more impactful than anything else. My family was the reason I fought to keep living. Now, my responsibility to my kin is a primary motivator for my life's efforts. This experience and the paranormality which surrounded it acted as a no-nonsense coercive life compass that showed me the right direction and then asked me to follow or simply get off the path altogether because I had been going the wrong way for too long. Since then, I have always kept that compass in my back pocket, and I am more in touch with the directional knowledge it has to share. The teachings of this experience will always influence the course of my life, and I will always look back on this experience when I need a reminder of where life is present and the purpose of my path during difficult times. Adversity breeds invention and resilience, this adversity killed me but also allowed me to rewrite my story to better align with my family and the unseen realms of life. Though my heart is now physically weaker, I know because of this, I am stronger, and my family can rest assured I will never leave their side.

References

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