



STORIES FROM THE LAND

THE LAND IS RECONNECTING

A CONVERSATION WITH ANISHINAABE SOCIAL WORKER, LACEY WAGNER

Through conversation with Anishinaabe social worker and mental health and addictions counsellor Lacey Wagner, it is clear that wellness is not something that happens in isolation. It is rooted in relationships—with who we are, with one another, with community, culture and the land. Lacey sees this connection often reflected in the changing seasons.

“I feel strongly that we are deeply connected to the land and the seasons,” she says. “Thus, we personally experience the seasons within ourselves.”

As autumn arrives, conversations with the people she supports naturally begin to centre around letting go. The changing leaves become more than something to observe; they can offer a reminder that there may be things we are carrying that we are ready to release.

It is one of the many ways Lacey believes the land can teach us how to care for ourselves and each other.



“THE LAND IS NOT ONLY THE GREATEST GIFT OF CREATION, BUT ALSO ONE OF OUR BIGGEST RESPONSIBILITIES.”

She points to something as simple as tending a garden. A garden requires work, dedication, respect, and time. The same can be said for our relationships—with others and with ourselves.

“When we tend to our land, we see what happens when you care for something,” she says. “If we invest our time, energy, and effort into ourselves and each other, we will be rewarded with living a good life.”

This way of understanding wellness challenges the idea that caring for ourselves is something we do entirely on our own. Instead, wellness is relational.

Lacey was taught to consider the whole person—the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual parts of ourselves—while also looking beyond the individual. People are connected to family, community, culture, land, and the generations who came before and will come after them.

In her work in mental health and addictions, Lacey sees how an individual struggle can be connected to much larger experiences, including trauma, grief, poverty, housing, colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and disconnection from family, culture, and the land.

“If the only question we ask is, ‘What does this individual need to change?’ we miss a huge part of the picture,” she says.

Instead, Indigenous approaches to wellness can encourage helpers to ask different questions: What happened around this person? Who are they connected to? Where do they belong? What strengths already exist within their family, culture, and community? What needs to change around them to support their wellness?

“That doesn’t remove individual responsibility,” Lacey says, “but it recognizes that wellness is both individual and collective. None of us are an island.”



**“HAVING TWO FEET ON THE LAND CAN
CREATE A GROUNDING CONNECTION THAT
YOU WOULD NOT EXPERIENCE SITTING IN
AN OFFICE.”**

Lacey is fortunate to work in an environment where supporting someone does not always mean sitting across from them in an office. She can take clients fishing, hiking, out on the water, or to a Healing Lodge.

For Lacey, “The conversations that occur while casting a line or going for a walk can feel, and often are a lot more genuine.”

Lacey has noticed that the land has a way of opening people up and bringing down walls. Our conversations flow more like rivers, and we tend to mimic the relationships we see on the land, allowing people to open up, work together and move from an individual outlook to one centred around community and the symbiosis of the ecosystem around us.

“EXPERIENCES ON THE LAND CHANGE OUR PERSPECTIVES, SHINE LIGHT IN OUR DARK SPACES, AND SHOW US THAT THERE ARE BEAUTIFUL POSSIBILITIES OUTSIDE OF OUR STRUGGLES.”

Those moments on the land speak to a teaching she wishes every social worker, educator and helping professional could carry with them: Connection itself can be medicine.

Helping professionals are often trained to look for an intervention, program or clinical technique. Those things have value, Lacey says, but they are not the only places where healing happens.

Healing can happen beside the water or walking through the bush. It can happen while picking medicines, participating in ceremony, sharing food, spending time with family or simply being somewhere that reminds a person who they are and where they belong.

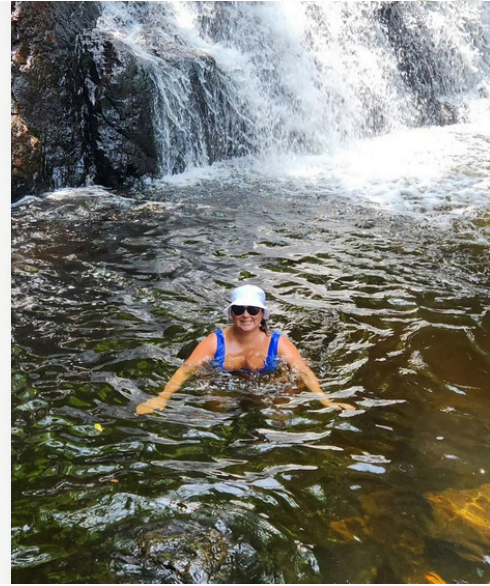
“THE LAND CAN CREATE SPACE FOR CONNECTION —TO OURSELVES, TO CULTURE, TO COMMUNITY AND TO SOMETHING LARGER THAN OURSELVES.”



The land can also support the people who spend their days supporting others.

Burnout, compassion fatigue and feeling overwhelmed are realities for many people working in helping professions. For Lacey, connecting with the land can offer perspective.

“Connecting with the land takes you outside of yourself and into something bigger than your problems,” she says.



She encourages people to pay attention to what is already happening around them.

“Hug a tree and focus on an energy exchange. Look at the falling leaves and remind yourself of what you are carrying that you need to let go. Admire the dandelion pushing through the cement and know your own strength and resiliency. Feeling the sun on your skin and sitting in that appreciation can warm the coldest parts of you.”

And when helping professionals feel guilty about taking time for themselves, Lacey offers the same reminder they might give the people they support:

“You cannot pour from an empty cup. If you are not taking care of yourself, then you cannot do your best work to support those who are counting on you.”



“RELATIONSHIP COMES WITH RESPONSIBILITY.”

For Lacey, however, connection to land cannot be reduced to another wellness strategy or therapeutic tool. There is a danger, she says, in thinking about the land only in terms of what it can give us.

“From an Indigenous perspective, our relationship with the land is reciprocal. It isn’t just about going onto the land because it makes us feel peaceful or grounded. We also have responsibilities to the land.”

That responsibility can mean respecting what we take, taking only what we need, caring for water and the environment, and considering what we will leave behind for future generations.

“The land isn’t simply a wellness resource or a therapeutic tool,” she says. “It’s a relationship. And like any healthy relationship, it can’t only be about what we receive; there also has to be respect, gratitude and responsibility.”

When we begin seeing the land as a relationship rather than simply a place we visit, Lacey says, something changes.

“We gain a friend, a confidant, a support and a home.”

It also reminds us of our place within something much larger.

“The land is a living being, and if we treated it as such, we would understand that we are one piece of a greater whole, not the whole itself. It teaches us respect and humility.”



“THE LAND TEACHES US TO LISTEN.”

Lacey recalls once going on a medicine walk where she was taught that the land prepares us for what is coming. Certain plant medicines may grow in abundance when they will be needed. To Lacey, it reflects the idea that the land has already provided much of what people need—not only to survive, but to thrive.

“We just need to remember to look for it,” she says. “She is telling us what is coming, but we seem to have forgotten how to listen.”

Perhaps that act of listening is part of what the land offers helping professionals, educators, young people and communities alike: a chance to reconnect with relationships and knowledge that have always been there.

“I think our responsibility as helpers isn’t always to be the person who has the answer,” Lacey says. “Sometimes it’s to help people reconnect with the relationships and knowledge that were already there.”

And sometimes, that reconnection begins simply by stepping outside.