

# Stories That Mend: Reconciling Intergenerational Trauma in *Medicine Walk*

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## Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Mary Ann Gilles' course, ENGL 112W, Literature Now. The assignment asked students to write a 5–7-page paper engaging with the course texts and explore the theme of reconciliation and the “stories from people who have fought through their resentment and hatred to gain a sense of peace”. The paper uses MLA citation style.

Richard Wagamese's *Medicine Walk* profoundly explores the enduring impacts of intergenerational trauma on familial relationships within the context of Indigenous identity. This paper examines the estranged bond between Eldon and Frank Starlight, foregrounding the silent, avoidant nature of trauma and its capacity to perpetuate cycles of emotional detachment across generations. By situating Eldon and Frank's struggles within the broader legacy of colonial oppression, Wagamese underscores storytelling's power to bridge generational divides and foster emotional restoration.

Intergenerational trauma refers to extreme psychological distress or harm wherein individuals are impacted to such a degree that their children often struggle with the lingering effects of their parents' post-traumatic state (Generational Trauma: A Personal Essay on Trauma | URevolution). In contemporary society, recovery efforts frequently rely on pharmacological therapies designed to mitigate their symptoms. However, the reliance on these standardized therapies often overlooks the deeper, more intricate realities of inherited pain. Owing to that, Richard Wagamese contends that the true horror of intergenerational trauma lies in its inexpressibility; those afflicted often lack the language or means to articulate their suffering, compounding their isolation. This silence thereby necessitates a more

profound form of healing—one that is anchored in the creation of a support system composed of listeners and storytellers to foster reconciliation.

In *Medicine Walk*, Richard Wagamese delves into this ideology through the fraught relationship between Franklin and Eldon Starlight. Eldon, Frank’s absent father, battles deep-seated guilt in choosing to abandon his mother and failing to provide stability to his family. Through a series of evocative confessions, Eldon contextualizes their shared history of abandonment and the complexities of Indigenous experiences. Over time, the focus shifts to Frank’s transformative journey toward understanding his father. Through their gradual evolution from estrangement to understanding, Wagamese makes it clear that storytelling is not only a vehicle for individual rehabilitation but also has the capacity to bridge generational and relational divides.

Eldon’s personal struggles serve as a foundation for the text’s theme of intergenerational trauma, particularly in his unresolved guilt. His abandonment of his mother introduces this theme early in the novel. Reflecting on this period, Eldon confesses, “Felt like I was no account and it pissed me off. Made walkin’ away easier, but the anger cooled after a time. Then it was just guilt an’ shame over leavin’ her alone with that bastard. Got to be so it ate me bad” (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 99-100). Eldon’s sustained sense of inadequacy is explained in the recollection of his separation from his mother. The phrase “no account” signifies Eldon’s profound sense of worthlessness, highlighting the theme of internal struggle with self-esteem. His anger, revealed by his admission that it “pissed [him] off” provides a temporary justification for abandoning his responsibilities as it “made walkin’ away easier”. This fleeting relief subsides as the “anger cooled,” and gives way to “guilt an’ shame”. Eldon’s transition from denial to remorse in his use of the phrase “ate me bad” powerfully conveys the nature of his consuming guilt and how it significantly impacted his emotional and mental well-being. This flashback vividly captures how the separation from his mother has created deep roots in his sustained sense of inadequacy.

Furthermore, Eldon’s psychological crises are deeply embedded in his inability to confront his past, as such, they have manifested into symptoms of emotional paralysis and self-sabotage. This is revealed in the passage: “He couldn’t sleep. The certainty of failure, the landscape of his secrets, became the terror that kept him awake” (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 222). The phrase “the certainty of failure” again captures Eldon’s entrenched belief that he is destined to perpetuate the mistakes of his past. These unresolved issues coalesce into “terror that kept him awake,” a visceral manifestation of his profound distress. In

addition, Eldon's incapacity to process the enormity of his self-condemnation resulted in his emotional paralysis. His fear of confronting his past engenders a state of perpetual avoidance, which is evident in his alcoholism and how he habitually "drifted in and out of [Frank's] life randomly" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 26). Moreover, the term "secrets" not only signifies the shame and traumas that dominate his inner world but also the intergenerational weight of silence: a silence that perpetuates the cycles of trauma he inherited and now risks passing onto Frank. Through Eldon's emotional stasis, Wagamese explores how trauma stifles meaningful connections, particularly within familial relationships, and weaves the theme of familial loss into the strained bond between Eldon and Frank.

The theme of the avoidant nature of trauma eroding familial relationships is further explored in Eldon and Frank's strained bond. Frank has developed emotional detachment from his father, claiming that when he "thought of the word father he could only ever imagine [Bunky]" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 27). Additionally, Frank's traumas have led him to believe that if he "simply left [Eldon] to die [...]. Nothing would be different" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 26). By emphasizing Frank's deep resentment toward Eldon's absenteeism, Wagamese illustrates the silent rawness of intergenerational trauma as Eldon's psychological crises render him unable to fulfill the role of a father, perpetuating Frank's sense of abandonment and resentment. This dynamic exemplifies the pervasive nature of trauma, as the unhealed wounds of one generation inevitably reverberate into the next. However, at this detrimental starting point, Wagamese uses these crises not merely to depict the destructiveness of trauma but to underscore the transformative potential of storytelling. Eldon's confessions, painful as they are, begin to disrupt the cycle of silence, creating space for understanding and reconciliation.

The tension between unspoken pain and the power of storytelling is expanded upon as Eldon struggles with the weight of his unhealed wounds. His separation from his mother and his inability to be a reliable father manifests negatively in his early interactions with Frank, widening the emotional wedge between them. This distance, rooted in their shared turmoil, is gradually exposed when Frank confides in Becka, stating, "I can't know what he believes. He talks a lot, but I still got no sense of him. So far, it's all been stories. She nodded. It's all we are in the end. Our stories" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 103). Frank's frustration with Eldon stems from the perception that his confessions, though verbose, fail to convey the truth, leaving him disconnected and unable to understand his

father's inner world. The sentiment "He talks a lot," but still "[has] no sense of him" underscores the incommunicable nature of trauma which resists articulation, perpetuating their "collective psychological fragmentation" (Selfridge, 69). Wagamese positions these confessions as acts of bravery that facilitate healing; in this way, *Medicine Walk* not only examines the debilitating effects of trauma but also offers a pathway toward emotional liberation through the act of sharing one's truths.

This exploration of personal rehabilitation through storytelling is intricately connected to the larger historical forces that pervade the novel. Colonialism, a dominating undercurrent of *Medicine Walk*, shapes the dynamics between Eldon and Frank, weaving their relationship within a larger historical context of systemic cultural erosion of Indigenous peoples. This colonial legacy, which systematically strips Indigenous peoples of their culture, identity, and sense of belonging, is not only a thematic foundation for the novel but is also deeply reflective of Wagamese's own experiences. Wagamese's personal writing reveal a disdain for the church which prevented him from knowing that he "had a family, a history, a culture, a source for spirituality, [...] or a traditional way of living" (Wagamese, "Returning" 131). Through Frank, Wagamese fictionalizes his own struggles, portraying a young man burdened by a fractured sense of identity. Just as Wagamese was left to grapple with the void left by colonial displacement, Frank views Eldon's abandonment of his mother as a severance of his connection to his grandmother, further deepening his dislocation. This intense betrayal makes it difficult for Frank to see past Eldon's failures and how they "ate [Eldon] bad" to which Becka responds to Frank, telling him that Eldon "was brave for telling his story". Becka's response, "What he done was brave" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 102) and "It's all we are in the end. Our stories," (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 103) offers a profound acknowledgment that stories are central to our identities despite their gaps and imperfections.

This recognition of storytelling's restorative potential parallels Wagamese's personal epiphany, where he, like Frank, later chooses to confront the symbol of his pain to move toward reconciliation. Wagamese recounts how his "simmering anger" (Wagamese, "Returning" 131) led him to visit the church, where he unexpectedly found solace in the minister's vulnerability. As he listens to the minister share multiple stories of personal struggle and spiritual shortcomings, Wagamese decides to return for multiple weeks realizing that there was "no self-aggrandization, no inferred superiority" (Wagamese, "Returning" 132) in the minister's attitude- only humanity and bravery inherent in sharing a story of

personal struggle. Similarly, Becka understands that although Eldon's stories may initially seem fragmented or insufficient in bridging the divide with Frank, they are crucial in revealing Eldon's internal struggles and for Frank to begin to understand his father's complexity. This encapsulates a central theme of the text: sharing stories is imperative in the process of recovery. After Becka offers this idea to Frank, Frank begins to grasp that it takes courage to disclose one's shameful experiences. By acknowledging that "it's all we are in the end," there is recognition that stories carry the essence of who they are. The confrontation of hardships through storytelling fulfills Wagamese's perception of what it means to be an "Indian" (Wagamese, "Returning" 133).

*Medicine Walk's* explicit focus on storytelling as a catalyst for facing trauma is inextricably tied to Wagamese's broader intention of telling stories that deliberately showcase "our capacity for forgiveness, for self-examination, for compassion, and for our yearning for peace" (Wagamese, "Returning" 133). Such commitment becomes unignorable in Frank's transition from anger to empathy, most vividly conveyed in a scene where "he [...] prowled around for wood [...] and thought about his father scavenging breakable wood [...] and he had an idea of him as a small kid, and when he stood finally with his arms full and made his way back to the camp he understood that he bore more than wood in his arms" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 50). This excerpt illustrates Frank's gradual escape from the confines of cyclical trauma and finds himself growing a genuine desire to understand Eldon. The image of "prowled" suggests a sense of urgency and underlying danger that Frank feels. However, as Frank gathers wood for the camp with an initial restlessness and anger, he begins to ponder on Eldon's experiences, where he "thought about his father scavenging breakable wood" as he is doing now, signifying how Frank is beginning to care more for seeing things from his father's perspective. Frank also imagines his father as a child, scavenging wood under similar circumstances. This parallel marks Frank's realization that his father, like him, had to navigate hardship and carry burdens far beyond their years. When he returns to camp he carries "more than wood", embodying the shift Wagamese advocates for: moving beyond the weight of inherited pain's cyclical pattern to foster renewal instead. This moment is pivotal in his fractured relationship with Eldon and a significant turning point in Frank's new willingness to redeem both himself and his father. So, Wagamese successfully portrays the transition from resentment to emotional peace and deeper connection, fulfilling his commitment to telling stories of self-resolution in addition to underscoring the text's larger theme of the mending power of storytelling.

*Medicine Walk* reaches its resolution with both characters growing to understand each other and embody empathy instead of malice for the distress they inherited. Eldon achieves his goal of dying the warrior way and finding self-acceptance after revealing his greatest regrets to Frank. Frank gains a sacred connection to his father at the time of Eldon's death. This is exemplified when he lies next to his buried father: "He lay there awake and looked out at the night and felt the stillness. It was heavy as a thick blanket, and in the depth of that quiet he was afraid to move, afraid to break it, of sacrilege, of piercing something that settled over him seamlessly, attached him to his dead father" (Wagamese, *Medicine Walk* 235). In this moment, Frank feels a comforting stillness that feels "heavy as a thick blanket." This metaphor conveys the comforting peace Frank is enveloped in as he finds a sense of calm and security. This sensation is profound to Frank because it symbolizes a newfound quietude much like Wagamese's experiences in church, where he, with his eyes closed, admits, "I do not know just exactly when my anger and resentment disappeared (Wagamese, "Returning" 132). For Frank, this feeling was tender as he "was afraid to move" because it felt sacrilegious to be "piercing something that settled over him seamlessly," indicating that the stillness of moving past his turmoil and resentment to a place of respect and humility has truly permeated Frank's inner being. Reflecting Wagamese's personal convictions wherein "you create harmony with truth and you build truth out of humility" (Wagamese, "Returning" 133). This reverence shows that Frank is now able to appreciate the gravity of his father's life and death as if he should be cautious in the presence of a fragile sensation that is inviolable or almost holy. Moreover, the confession of Frank's attachment to his dead father highlights his recognition and acceptance of Eldon as a part of his complex identity and whose heritage is intimately intertwined with.

To conclude, Richard Wagamese's *Medicine Walk* masterfully navigates the complexities of intergenerational trauma and successfully describes the journey toward restoration. Wagamese's narrative serves as a profound meditation on the Indigenous themes of forgiveness, fostering understanding, and developing a sense of compassion to invoke reflection in the reader and to urge them to confront resentment and find self-redemption through storytelling and empathy. The novel begins by establishing the theme of trauma in familial loss, as Eldon's abandonment of his mother introduces the guilt that will later shape his relationship with Frank. Eldon's confessions of his past failures gradually open a pathway for Frank to move beyond resentment. Through pivotal moments, such as conversations with Becka and reflecting on Eldon's struggles, Frank begins to

see his father as a complex, vulnerable individual rather than solely through the lens of his failures. This transformation is further illustrated in Frank's shift from anger to empathy, symbolized by his gathering wood and imagining Eldon as a lost child. The story concludes with Frank finding peace, as he acknowledges his father's humanity and embraces their shared burdens. Ultimately, Wagamese's belief that there is a dire need to tell "stories of healing instead of a relentless retelling and re-experiencing of pain" (Wagamese, "returning" 133) resonates deeply in the narrative. By embodying these values, *Medicine Walk* demonstrates that storytelling has the power to heal, bridge divides, and foster understanding. Through Eldon and Frank's journey from estrangement to connection, the novel delivers a universal message about the importance of confronting pain, seeking reconciliation, and finding redemption through shared stories.

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