

Medicine Walk by Richard Wagamese  
“My Walk, Your Walk, Our Walk ... A Tribute Lecture to my Friend

Good morning everyone ...

With Medicine Walk, Richard Wagamese sliced open the Canadian Indigenous experience, exposing to the receptive reader the pain, the scars, the wounds inflicted both historically and in present day on the descendants of the original inhabitants of Turtle Island.

But did you hear?

Did you see?

Did you enjoy a good story or did you recognize the lost soul who lives near a heating vent on Portage and Main, on Hastings Street, or on a hundred other similar streets?

Did you see the youth struggling to reconcile who he is with the identity mainstream throws stones at? And as a result, did you suddenly understand the youth suicide rate?

And did you resolve to never ever again throw stones?

Did you resolve to love the drunk, to pray for the addict, to try every day in some small way to wrap the Indigenous in something other than contempt?

I pray you did. I pray you did.

Because you see, as I read, as I prepared for this event, as I reread the words of my friend, I felt the authenticity, the strength, the wisdom Richard carried in every word of Medicine Walk, but I couldn't help but wonder ... what did you see when you read?

I saw the Indian experience.  
I saw through Indian eyes.  
I saw the life of every Indigenous person I know  
I saw pain that wont heal and stories too difficult to share.  
I saw my friends and family and former partners.  
And I saw Richard.

My name is Sandi Boucher. I am Miskopaganaquek, Red Thunderbolt Woman of the Loon Clan and a proud member of Seine River First Nation in northern Ontario and I am so proud to say I knew and loved Richard more than some and nowhere near as closely as others.

I work as a motivational speaker. I am a published author and I make my living on a stage, behind a mic, working to empower the Indigenous people of this country or working with mainstream to understand just a little more of the damage done and why things have to change.

In line with my work, for quite a few years I operated an Indigenous Speaker's Network. There was no formal application process to join but there was an authentication process. I would know by speaking to you what world view you carried and whether it was adopted by you or birthed to you. It was thanks to the network that my phone rang on an otherwise ordinary day. I said hello in my usual way only to have a kind voice on the other end ask to speak to me.

I confirmed I was indeed Sandi Boucher and that yes, I did own Traditionally Speaking Indigenous Speaker's Network and at that moment Richard introduced himself and asked if he could apply to be part of my network.

And my heart stopped.

And I asked if he could hang on for two seconds and when he confirmed that yes, that would be fine I covered the phone and screamed a silent "YES" to the heavens.

The author I had idolized for years wanted to be part of my network.

Many social medias convos and emails followed that original phone call until we finally got to meet, in Thunder Bay, when him and Joseph Boyden came to speak about mental health.

I went to his event. I listened. I laughed. I loved and the next day we drove around and chatted and laughed some more, sharing so carefully with each other, comfy in some ways yet still so programmed to fear the judgement that may or may not lurk behind the words.

There was no judgement in my eyes or words and I saw none or heard none in his.

And I continued to love him, perhaps even more after that. I loved his frailty and his authenticity. I loved his humour and how like the wisest of our people, he could put together a sentence that danced with your soul for hours, days or even months after you heard him say it or after you read it.

Richard was human and he was Indigenous.

He laughed when he hurt and he built really good walls because that is how we survive. And no matter how many accolades we receive, how many stages we stand upon, no matter how many love us ... we still hurt. We still feel separate. We still feel unsure of your acceptance and often even unworthy.

We still feel ... Indian.

So, I must say being here this weekend is an honour and a privilege I have never had before, in all my years of speaking, and one I honestly hope I never have again because I would rather sit and laugh with my friends then honour their memory.

I was devastated when I heard of Richard's passing in the way that one of a few survivors feels somehow more vulnerable when another survivor falls.

So few of us make it without giving up who we are. So few of us can talk of what it is really like and still be able to sleep or wake. So few of us talk of these things at all.

Richard did more than talk of them. He wrote of them and for his words I will remain forever thankful.

My Walk, Your Walk, Our Walk ... is the title for my little blurb today. I choose it because of a commonality I have found among the Indigenous that I have met, a skill that gives us hope and perspective and reassurance, a skill that in my mind is sadly lacking and so desperately needed by the Indigenous and by those in mainstream who find themselves equally lost.

The skill – to find the lesson behind the words.

I raised my kids in line with our teachings. I used a talking stick to work through conflicts and we discussed daily what we had learned. Dreams, thoughts, visions were given equal value to lessons and homework assignments. It is how they learned to believe in themselves and who they are. Another trait I sadly see lacking in so many of the non-Indigenous.

So it is with these teachings, it is through some personal stories and my Ojibwe cultural lens that I share some of the words that touched my soul as I read "Medicine Walk", as I walked with my friend through his story, his life, and mine, as I prepared to walk here to you.

I hope you will come to realize, as I did that "Medicine Walk" is so much more than a fictional story. It is a historical recording of the Canadian Indigenous experience, far more accurate than any text used presently in our schools.

	<p>But even more, it is a manual for how to fix so many of the ills that plague our Indigenous communities, our cross-cultural relationships, and even this country as a whole.</p> <p>In Honorary Indian, my first book, I made the reader an honorary Indigenous person with whom I openly shared my Mother’s teachings.</p> <p>Today, for you, I interpret and share Richard’s teachings via the countless examples he has given us in this book ...</p> <p>Once shared, it will be up to you to choose if you use his wisdom so that we may all one day take not only a personal, but a Canadian collective Medicine Walk.</p> <p>Let us begin ...</p>	
5	<p>... land and moon and water summing up the only equation that lent scope to his world, and he rode through it fleshed out and comfortable with the feel of the land around him like the refrain of an old hymn. It was what he knew. It was what he needed.</p>	<p>On page 5, Richard speaks to our connect to land, more often than not morphed into some horrible cliché these days but for us, simply truth. The land makes sense. The land calms our fears. The land comforts us like a Mother’s hug. The land is reliable, dependable, wise, there.</p> <p>The land welcomes us. The land does not throw stones.</p>
40	<p>Eldon’s companion:</p> <p>We all got a right to go out the way we want.</p>	<p>George</p>

<p>49</p>	<p>All's Im trying to say is that we never had the time for learnin about how to be out here. None of us did. White man things was what we needed to learn if we was gonna eat regular. Indian stuff just kinda got left behind on accounta we were busy getting by in that world.</p>	<p>Residential schools, Degrees Jobs ...</p> <p>Over and over the indigenous then as now find they have no time to learn the indian stuff as we attempt to learn the things we need to survive .... yet so many are coming to see that it is in that knowledge that their existence suddenly makes sense, that their view of the world becomes the norm, where they finally find peace.</p> <p>My story ... elder in Toronto</p> <p>In the story, Franklin takes his comfort from knowing who he is and what he knows, with little consideration of what others think. That is true confidence, the confidence of someone who truly knows who they are.</p>
<p>51</p>	<p>The old man's way of teaching Franklin ...</p> <p>He listened when the kid asked questions and he took time to show him how to do things. Then, rather than hover over his shoulder, he left the kid to whichever chore he'd shown interest in. If he needed a hand or the chore needed fixing once he was done, the old man would help him through it so he could learn. But for the jobs themselves, he was left to work.</p>	<p>How we learn.</p> <p>It is how many of us could build confidence, self- assurance, self-reliance and confidence.</p> <p>It is time for education to change.</p>

<p>55</p>	<p>And on page 55 and 56 Richard speaks of Indigenous pain ...</p> <p>Well, whisky keeps things away that some people don't want around neither. Like dreams, recollections, wishes, other people sometimes."</p>	<p>Mom's teaching ... when they are doing something you cannot even fathom doing.</p>
<p>56</p>	<p>"Things get busted sometimes. When they happen in the world you can fix 'em most times. But when they happen inside a person they're harder to mend. Eldon got broke up pretty bad inside," he said.</p>	
<p>57</p>	<p>"Then why say?"</p> <p>Shared he was Franklin's father.</p>	<p>I giggled at the common difference between Indigenous and mainstream ...</p> <p>Why say? We are responsible for what our words do. It is not enough that we need to say them. What do they do to the receiver?</p> <p>Just for you – ego For them – now we are on the right path.</p> <p>Sometimes on our mission to heal, we hurt ... and we can't do that.</p>

<p>63</p>	<p>Then he disassembled the lean-to and laid the boughs and saplings in the trees and helped his father up onto the horse. Why do that? His father asked Respect. Gotta leave it the way you found it, he said.</p> <p>Can't ever leave nothing the way you found it.</p> <p>You'd be the one to know that, I suppose.</p>	<p>Stewards ...</p> <p>We do not have the right to destroy or cause harm yet we do with bigger highways or new dams.</p> <p>If only the world understood, we wouldn't have climate issues.</p> <p>We would live in harmony as the animals do. Food, clean water, clean air, and stress nowhere near what we inflict on ourselves today.</p> <p>We damage our home, we damage mother earth. We are damaged in return.</p>
<p>64</p>	<p>He looked up at his father to point it out to him but he was slumped in the saddle with his chin bumping his chest and he called to him. His father raised a hang limply from the saddle horn then let it fall. He was weaker. There was a different odour coming off him now, something like old leaves mouldering on the forest floor, and the kid wondered if the moment was close by. The thought raised a lump in his throat and he gritted his teeth and mouthed a silent curse at himself for it.</p>	<p>The acceptance of the dying. The deathbed acceptance of all their shortcomings.</p> <p>Powerful, personal, emotional And a gift I pray you are all able to receive when and if you find yourself in that position, at someone's side as they say goodbye.</p> <p>This time is for you, not for them.</p>

65	<p>“Yeah. At first he brung me out all the time when I was small. Showed me plants and how to gather them. Everything a guy would need is here if you want it and know how to look for it, he said. You gotta spend time gatherin’ what you need. What you need to keep you strong. He called in a Medicine Walk.”</p>	<p>The main theme... how we must live, Indigenous or not.</p> <p>Conscious living.  What are you gathering?  Is it what you need?  Does it make you stronger?</p> <p>Friends?  Food?  Activities?</p>
66	<p>You got to be a philosopher, his father said.</p> <p>The kid looked at him and shook his head. “Not so much. I mean, out here things just come all on their own sometimes. Thoughts, ideas, stuff I never really had a head for.</p>	<p>In the bush I can hear Creator talking.</p> <p>PTSD soldiers from Afghanistan. You become like what you surround yourself with.</p>
69	<p>The kid shrugged. “I sorta think you gotta let a mystery be a mystery for it to give you anything.</p>	<p>Get okay with not knowing.  Get okay with not having the right to know.</p> <p>Acceptance in a good way.  Not meant to know.  Don’t need to know simply for the sake of knowing.</p> <p>Our ceremonies for example.</p>
78	<p>Becka and the spirit plate</p>	<p>Smiled, warmed my heart.  Authentic  Offering to spirits to find them and thank them.  They say where welcome and we need them.</p>

106	<p>After the rain the land was a gumbo of smells. Pitch and bog, the tang of spruce, and the dank racid smell of wet bear tracing the weave of the creek to his left. He drew it all into him, closed his eyes a few paces and held it, let it fill him. The night and his father's story had drained him and he needed the feel of the land at his feet and the sounds of it to quell the clamour in his head.</p>	<p>Ground yourself. Mom's teachings</p>
120	<p>"Sorry you had to see that"</p> <p>The old man apologizing because Franklin saw his Dad drunk</p>	<p>Yet it is what it is ... honest, real. It is not about illusions or expectations ... but honestly or at least shouldn't it be?</p>
122	<p>Franklin debating what a Dad is</p>	<p>Wondering how many of all races and creeds have struggled with the same question?</p>
127	<p>The fishing trip ...</p>	<p>Made me think of just how many are living on the memory of one good fishing trip ... or what should have been, what could have been an amazing fishing trip, or Christmas, or vacation or ...</p>
158	<p>Jimmy – He said that a man oughta know why hes called what he is. You oughta know that too, Frank.</p>	<p>Our spirit names ... But even before I got my name, I knew the importance Cassandra Fallon Lorraine Roy</p>

167	<p>Eldon sharing how he began to drink heavy to bury the memory of killing Jimmy.</p>	<p>Made me think of the hauntings that our lost are trying to bury.</p> <p>How I too have made that choice. How I know Richard made that choice and how sadly, we learn, sometimes too late, that it never works.</p>
168	<p>Eldon and Franklin speaking</p> <p>You never been in a war Frank.</p> <p>Not one of my own leastways.</p> <p>Whats that suppose to mean?</p> <p>Means Im still living the one you never finished.</p>	<p>Intergenerational trauma. Fighting the inherited war. Youth choosing not to ...</p> <p>What war are we passing on? Who are we teaching our youth to hate, to fear, to mistrust? Will we heal? Will they?</p>
232	<p>Franklin reflects on all he has learned ...</p> <p>He thought about everything he had been told. It was grim but more than he'd had before. It felt alien, like listening on someone else's story. The skeletal man who slept in front of him seemed to resemble nothing of the man who'd walked through the tale he told. He wondered how time worked on a person. He wondered how he would look years on and what effect this history would have on him. He expected that it might have filled him but all he felt was emptiness and a fear that there would be nothing that could fill that void.</p>	

	<p>His thoughts turned toward Eldon Starlight and there was only pity there for a life with benchmarks that only ever set out the boundaries of pain and loss, woe and regret, nothing to bring him comfort in his last days. He thought of his lost mother, and wondered how it might have felt to touch her, to put a hand or the other on her shoulder and claim some of her energy as his own, or if, as an infant, enough of her spirit had clung to him despite all the lean years of absence to carry him forward without loneliness. He hoped so. His life was built of the stories of vague ghosts. He wanted desperately to see them fleshed out and vital. History, he supposed, lacked that power.</p>	<p>Maturity of the man ... The acceptance that sometimes there are no answers Sometimes there is no resolution.</p>
234	<p>His father stepped to the very edge, still clinging to him. Then he nudged him aside and the kid watched as he closed his eyes and stood there wobbling on the edge of that drop. He wondered if he needed to reach out and grab him but his father slowly raised his arms to shoulder height and held them there with eyes closed and his head tilted back, moaning something soft and low that the kid leaned closer to hear.</p> <p>“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”</p>	<p>And with those words we see ...  The pain of those who are no longer able to carry the pain ... if they ever were.</p>

238	<p>And the truest sentence ever for so, so many ...</p> <p>“He cursed at the world, at his own sorry history, and at himself for caring.</p>	
241	<p>The old man and the kid again ...</p> <p>Sharing the pain, owning the pain, without any attempt to take it away, simple because they are wise enough to know you can't</p>	<p>And with that ... the end.</p>
103	<p>His father moaned and the kid regarded him. “He don't seem much of a warrior to me.” He sipped at the tea.</p> <p>“Whos to say how much of anythin' we are? Becka said. “Seems to me the truth of us is where it cant be seen. Comes to dyin', I guess we all got a right to what we believe.”</p> <p>“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.</p> <p>She only nodded, “It's all we are in the end. Our stories.”</p>	<p>And that made me think of my dear friend Richard.</p> <p>If only we could all become something so absolutely beautiful.</p>

So often I hear “why do they go back? Why do Indigenous people return to their communities that have so many challenges?

Now you know why. Because common themes are a choir that sings to our heart. To walk among those that understand, with or without words, is what we need to feel accepted.

I am closer to Richard thanks to this book and the opportunity to review it for this event so Chi Miigwetch for that.

But now we have come to the end of our collective Medicine Walk. Through Richard’s words, through my words I hope you have found something you need, something that helps you feel stronger.

The future is in your hands now. It is up to you to use what you learned here this weekend and I pray you do.

Please use it, use it to make OUR path more accepting for us all.

And Richard ... I love you and I miss you my friend.

Miigwetch ... thank you everyone.