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“when we know our directions we can never be lost”

Deep listening is transformative. When we are fully present, we can hear and hold kernels of each other’s stories. These kernels take root deep within us and emerge as new growth, opening us to grasp multiple truths and ways of being.

Altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid crisis, socio-economic forces, and increased polarization, Bissell Centre and Boyle Street Community Services engaged in more intentional discussions about how to better work with community. The wisdom of what better means lives with people who experience poverty in Edmonton and the staff who provide daily support. Through ceremony and with guidance from Indigenous Elders, staff and community gathered in circle to teach us their truths. With each season participants responded to new questions, giving way to raw honesty and insights that centered on connection, identity, and reciprocity.

Over 700 participants shared their experiences and wisdom in more than 100 circles. Circle is a powerful process emphasizing equity and listening. Every voice in circle is equal and heard, in turn, with attention and openness. Circle was inherent in Courageous Voices; an intentional dismantling of power dynamics to give space for curiosity and reimagining.

The stories of people experiencing poverty and those of our staff are at the core of Courageous Voices. Circles broadened to include advisory, planning, and leadership teams along with representatives from business, community, social services, and government. Over 400 Edmontonians completed a public survey, sharing their perspectives on poverty and homelessness. Collectively, all the components of this listening journey offered vital insight into what brings us together as humans on this earth and where we struggle to truly see each other. On the following pages, everything in quotation marks are direct quotes shared in circle. In them, we trust you will see yourself.

Courageous Voices is a discovery story of medicines and ecosystems, a story we have a responsibility to share with you. We invite you to listen and affect change in your personal and professional communities. To reconsider our past and embrace possibility.

Tawâw. Welcome.



Circle is a unique, intentional space created for us to share. And, more importantly, for us to *listen* attentively, with our whole being. Indigenous circle practice centres in ceremony, drawing out and amplifying the connections we have with each other—connections that allow “us to hear it, feel it, and do it.”



Root and grow

Courageous Voices rooted us in listening and prompts us to grow into the wisdom of the teachings that surfaced. Throughout, we embraced uncertainty and iteration: debating, trying, listening, learning, adapting, trying again, learning some more. We relied on humour, reflection, and ceremony to ease and lean into the discomfort needed to strengthen and deepen relationships, including between our two organizations.

In each panel, root and grow centres on a single question; an invitation to you personally, and to us collectively, to question, consider, and act.





Home


**“home is where you feel,
your history, your family”**

Home is a place where our love roots deep into our past and holds us with genuine care. To come home is to step into a place where we are safe; it is to be “snuggled in somewhere” surrounded by those we choose to love.

Having a home allows us to navigate the world outside our door. It is the center of our world, providing a protective shield to heal, create, and feel. There is power in being able to choose to close our door; to contain what is within. When we live without that power, we live without the safety to fully be ourselves.

Circle participants spoke of home and family in the same breath; emphasizing the desire and right to be surrounded by unshakeable care, to be “seen and accepted.” While home and house are used interchangeably, in circle the differentiation was clear: a house is a physical location, a home is a place of sustenance.

Having a home, being at home, allows us to move past survival and find the strength, knowledge, and energy to see and grow connections. The sheltering threshold of entering our own home is foundational for us to loudly grieve, quietly care, shape courage, and surface hope.



The food we eat is more than fuel for our bodies. It is nourishment that fills our bellies and our spirits. Without a home, we eat what we can find or what is given to us. The simple autonomy of “making homemade” macaroni and cheese is lost.

Root and grow

Nêhiyaw teachings centre home around the concept of home fire —iskotêw— a place of peace and safety where we are accepted for who we are and can rally ourselves knowing we are held. When we invite each other into our spaces we ask that you feel at home. We extend love and offer shelter; it is an act of hospitality.

What would it look and feel like for each of us to practice radical hospitality where we welcome each other with genuine care?



Good Life

“healing not healed”

A good life is a living dream characterized in circle as a healing journey rooted in connections and stability. Meaningful authentic connections are offerings of love for us to see ourselves through the caring, hopeful eyes of others. There is stability in having safe spaces to grow, pathways to relevant education, and built-in “natural and professional” supports. The balance we find when we have both connections and stability is where we can trust our own worth and heal from what ails us.

Healing is a brave, evolving endeavour that reaches into the past and extends into the future. With healing comes “strength to deal with the harshness of the world” and to live in “honesty, truth, and not being afraid.” Connection and stability keep us afloat despite the biting judgement and hopelessness encountered in systems and everyday interactions: “I have given up on a good life for myself but want to help others.” Healing is a persistent, resilient move through gnawing pain towards a sure, peaceful answer to the question “do you know who you are?”

Healing affords a gentleness to hold and forgive ourselves and one another. Growth forces us to see and accept that many things can be true at the same time and to be self-determined in how we respond to that knowledge.

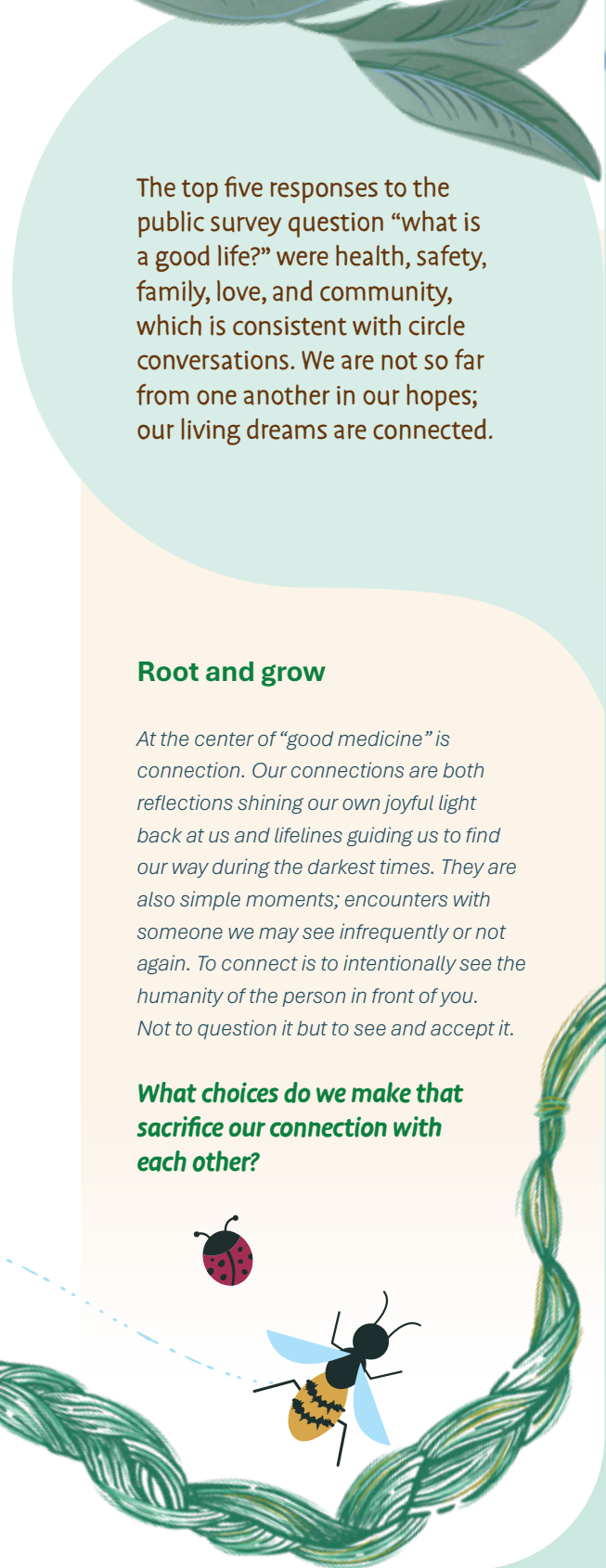
A good life is real—and possible. Survival of the fittest is not the solution. Connections to spirit, love and the knowledge to make informed decisions disrupt patterns, break cycles, and release trauma. A good life requires an unwavering belief in possibility and a steadfast desire to change the future to one that is filled with mutual care and reciprocity: “good medicine.”

The top five responses to the public survey question “what is a good life?” were health, safety, family, love, and community, which is consistent with circle conversations. We are not so far from one another in our hopes; our living dreams are connected.

Root and grow

At the center of “good medicine” is connection. Our connections are both reflections shining our own joyful light back at us and lifelines guiding us to find our way during the darkest times. They are also simple moments; encounters with someone we may see infrequently or not again. To connect is to intentionally see the humanity of the person in front of you. Not to question it but to see and accept it.

What choices do we make that sacrifice our connection with each other?



Poverty

“not having what you need”

Poverty is a trajectory with many starting points and a definition much broader than we comfortably acknowledge. Not having enough financial resources to meet basic needs is our most simple definition of poverty; but that does not speak to what it means to live in poverty. Living in poverty is to be in a “constant state of hunger and unwellness.” The lacking and brokenness found in poverty affect all areas of our being. It is not “being given life skills as you grow.” It is “being alone and “living without love.” “It is not having a home.”

Lacking bleeds hope and energy and breeds an agonizing cycle of fight and survival. Poverty constantly pulls us down and tosses us around, making healing and growth exponentially more difficult. Loss and grief are poverty’s siblings. We can become “bereft of self” from the injustice of working hard and still finding “it’s never enough.” The belief that “in Canada there’s a lot of support so people shouldn’t be poor” is unfair and inaccurate. It perpetuates dangerous trauma and stigma.

The immense effort of “hiding the signs that you are struggling so that you’re not stigmatized” compromise dignity and create “a sense of shame or guilt that... we’ve failed” when we ask for help. People living in poverty are further compromised, “relegated to invisibility or to [being] punished for not being invisible.” Being held as human and worthy, encompassed of perceived failings, is at the core of finding hope in poverty. We have a responsibility “to make the world a little bit more liveable” for each other; to “push back against keeping poverty invisible.”

Only a quarter of survey respondents believe current solutions to reduce poverty are effective; two-thirds believe affordable housing and mental health are the top reasons people experience poverty. Poverty is not a “moral failing;” 94% of survey respondents believe poverty can happen to anyone.

Root and grow

*“So much talent is trapped in poverty.”
Poverty is devastating for an individual, but we also lose tremendously as a society. Healing from poverty is a community endeavour; it does not happen in isolation. Expressing the reality and experience of poverty needs oxygen; it requires breathing room.*

**How do we create spaces to express grief and open to healing?
Where does celebration live in this?**

Roles and Reciprocity

“we are all permanently interdependent”

To be in poverty is to live on a precipice, its instinctual refrain of “praying for a sin or a miracle” revealing a desperation—and a request—to find solid footing to root and grow. Subsisting on the edge is to exist in the margins of society, fighting to be seen and accepted; to be acknowledged with kindness.

Reciprocity became a core teaching in circle: a step away from the edge, an antidote to disconnection, and with mutual care and love—*sâkhitowin*—the most basic interaction. Reciprocity is not lofty. It is a deeply human way of being that shows us who we can be together. Just as forest root systems know and direct energy to where it is required, so too do we have the capacity and intuition to attune to one another. The expansiveness with which we do this depends on our willingness to see and acknowledge those around us.

Roles give us purpose, shape our values, form our perceptions, and dictate how we show up for ourselves and one another. In circle, roles were articulated as an extension of who we are at our core. Knowing our own roles and those of others fosters understanding and empathy. Despite this, a distinct tension arose in circle in how staff and community perceive their roles.

Staff describe their roles as a calling; being a helper offers purpose and meaning. At the same time staff feel an unyielding pressure of being “outpaced by outsized issues” and carrying the weight of being “the last bastion of hope” in witnessing more people dying in poverty. There is a raw fierceness in staff experiences; an innate need to advocate for justice paired with the necessity of being okay with ambiguity, including not knowing what the next shift will bring.





Community speak of natural and claimed roles: “Our kokums gave us a sacred responsibility that we need to live up to.” The seriousness of this commitment carried through journeys of pain and grief. Community emphasized kinship—who we are to one another—as vital to understand and manifest roles. Relational experiences are prioritized over transactions; mutual care is a deliberate act and responsibility central to our humanity.

Community do not expect staff to “solve every problem.” What is sought is kinship: a continuous discovery to know one another’s evolving roles—those connected to our spirit and those we take on—and the wisdom that accompanies them. Knowing and fulfilling our roles gives us purpose, pride, and confidence. Through kinship we see our own truth in one another’s, uncovering and affirming a connection that reaches deeper than socio-economics and geography.

Reciprocity challenges the colonial binary of giver and receiver, knower and vessel. “In reciprocity this divide is intentionally collapsed” giving way to shared responsibility and mutuality; an acknowledgement of needing help and an offering of our own gifts to each other. With this intentional shift, what it feels like to be on the precipice changes too because we innately know that “we belong to each other.”

Ninety-one per cent of public survey respondents feel compassion and eighty-eight per cent feel empathy when seeing someone experience homelessness. Yet, fear, discomfort, uncertainty, and helplessness prevent respondents from assisting. Eighty-six per cent believe government is primarily responsible for eliminating poverty. The same number believe every individual—that is you and me—also have a responsibility to address poverty.

Root and grow

“If something like this existed before I would have felt cared for.” Everyone’s stories were accepted as teachings in Courageous Voices. Teachings are valuable and hold wisdom.

The act of asking curious questions and truly listening, of sharing a meal and offering protocol, were practical, obvious ways we demonstrated that every person is precious.

What judgements and assumptions do we need to let go of to be able to receive each other’s gifts?



Agency

“to help ourselves and others”

Our power is ignited when we know our roles and have the self-determination to express them. Our agency—access and freedom to make decisions about our own lives—does not exist in isolation; it is activated through the generosity of being able to ask for, offer, and accept help.

In circle, the question “what does asking for help look like?” garnered a visceral, unsettled response from community, staff, advisors, board members—everyone who was asked. We do not know how, nor are we given permission—in how our society exists today—to seek help. We lack the assurance to be vulnerable. We feel like a burden. We are afraid of being judged or rejected. “It’s an act of courage to ask for help” and we must have “hope that someone will be there” when we do ask. Interactions that focus on relationship foster trust that we can “drop our façade and be vulnerable [to] bring someone else in.”

“It’s hard to ask for help especially with society’s views of what is successful” and yet, without each other, our agency cannot be fully realized.

Agency is continuous and evolving, shifting and expanding as we learn from each other and grow. When we are self-determined, we decide where and how we seek help, have the fortitude to heal, and the capacity to attune and attend to each other. There is joy in autonomy. It affords a deep contentment knowing that what we believe and how we live is in sync. And “it is multiplied” in community because when we each have agency, our satisfaction and joy are infectious.

Agency is not only about today: we receive our ancestor’s teachings, discern them to live our lives with integrity, and cultivate them for our descendants. It is a gift.

Agency is a layered, complicated teaching. A prerequisite to realizing agency is safety: testing boundaries and causing friction knowing we will be caught and held. Safety gives us the power to choose curiosity over uncertainty, courage over fear. It is found in kinship, in moments of connection, big and small, that reveal a truth we have not yet considered; a challenge to our thinking; a new path. Our choices forge our path; the connections we have along the way change our direction.

Root and grow

Courageous Voices existed in between hopelessness and celebration. In circle, we heard a resounding cry of pain and strife, a scarcity of connection and resources to comfort and heal. These are truths. Alongside, we heard an abundance about laughter, kinship, and love. “My heart is bigger than my butt.” Wêyôtan—abundance—was affirmed in circle; a truth that there is enough for everyone.

**How can we embrace abundance to show up for each other, in big ways and small, while holding our own torn pieces and aspirations?
How do we accept and include each other as kin?**



The In Between

My Agency lives in the spaces in Between,
in between despair and celebration,
in between curiosity and fear.

It's born within the friction of crashing against
the expectations of Society
and
the constraints inside of Me,

It is a seedling with the audacity to grow in barren soil
and
It is the great oak tree that refuses to bend to the wind.

My agency is me,
It is the me I show the world
and
The me that cries out in quiet spaces

It is the choices that I make
and
What my Heart desires.

My agency lives in the dark crawling towards your Flame.

My agency is...
Strengthened in the storm
By
the trees that stand beside me,

Is sheltered in my growth
By
The flowers that grew before me

My agency is Ignited
By
The flames that reach out to Guide me.

My Agency is always inside of me
But
Only
Breathes

when Community surrounds me.

By Heather Goings- YoungChief
Dedicated to everyone who shared in circle