Colonization of Two-Spirit People

Due to colonization two-spirit peoples traditions have been lost or hidden. As a direct result, two-spirit people experience violence in their own communities due to our own internalization of racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Two-spirit people are often forced to move to larger cities in an attempt to find a more accepting community and build positive support networks. Two-spirit people still experience homophobia, discrimination and prejudice in the city as well as other issues such as racism. Being disconnected from family, community, and culture as well as experiencing homophobia, transphobia and discrimination means that many two-spirit people, and youth particularly, are considered to be at risk. There can be issues of rejection in the urban Aboriginal community as well as issues of racism within the urban mainstream Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) community. This rejection results in two-spirit people living on the streets, experiencing issues with food security and substance abuse. This creates greater vulnerability and can lead to criminal activity and a higher risk of sexual exploitation, suicide, disease, and other health related problems in addition to feelings of isolation, depression, and loneliness.

“Two-spirit(ed) people have experienced homophobia resulting in rejection from family and community. Some individuals experience internalized homophobia, and an inability to accept their own sexuality due to judgmental attitudes from society in general. Lack of acceptance produces ramifications of substance abuse, sexual, mental & physical abuse, no family or community support, internalized racism, sex trade, language barriers, low self-esteem, shame, fear, guilt, lack of work experience/education, lack of safer sex negotiating skills, sexual identity crisis and lack of peer counseling. This scenario has produced isolation which may result in suicide.”


Friendship Centres in Ontario

Friendship Centres are community spaces that provide culturally appropriate activities, programs and services for Aboriginal people of all ages.

Contact or visit your local Friendship Centre:

- Sign up for a program or activity
- Seek support
- Find out what’s happening in your community
- Volunteer

For more information on this campaign, go to OFIFC.org or Kanawayhitowin.ca

1-800-772-9291

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Two Spirit
Aboriginal People

Building Inclusive Communities

Honour Life, End Violence
To Include Is To Accept

Traditional Understandings of Gender

All across Turtle Island there are documented accounts of multiple gender roles beyond just male and female, often acknowledging more than two genders. These accounts show the widespread understanding and acceptance of all identities within our communities prior to and during contact.

Within these documented accounts, we know that two-spirit people performed specific functions within their communities. In some nations male-bodied two-spirit people were active as healers or medicine people, conducting mourning rites. They conveyed oral traditions and songs, participated in ceremony and performed special functions in connection with the setting up of the central post for Sun Dance. As well, they performed many other roles and responsibilities that their communities asked them to take up as part of their bundles.

In some nations female-bodied two-spirit people took on roles as chief, council, trader, hunter, trapper, peace missions, guides, vision quests, prophets and medicine people.

In all accounts, two-spirit people were respected by their communities, valued for their gifts and accepted for who they were.

Defining Two-Spirit

Two-spirit people have a long history within our communities. There are many recorded and orally recounted stories of same-sex marriage within our communities prior and during initial European contact.

Two-spirit people within many of our traditions were regarded as a third gender and in almost all cultures were regarded and revered for the role and responsibilities bestowed upon them.

Two-spirit people were often healers, visionaries, and medicine people within our communities. They were regarded as fundamental components of our communities, cultures, and societies.

Today, two-spirit people are Aboriginal people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, other gendered, and third/fourth gendered individuals who walk carefully within the worlds and between the genders.

Third and fourth gender are terms that were historically used to describe two-spirit people, acknowledging within our traditions that there are more than only two genders (male and female).

Due to colonization, loss of language, loss of culture, loss of traditional knowledge people and the negative experiences of many Aboriginal people, the roles and history of two-spirit people within our communities has been lost in our consciousness, oral histories, and traditions. Many Aboriginal people have adopted homophobic and transphobic attitudes towards two-spirit people.

What Does it Mean to be Inclusive?

Being inclusive and building inclusive spaces means recognizing two-spirit people exist and have existed in Aboriginal communities historically. Building and fostering inclusive spaces means:

- listening to people’s experiences;
- validating people’s experiences;
- being respectful;
- being culturally competent;
- being accessible;
- proving supports, including spiritual guidance where appropriate;
- being accepting;
- being open and non-judgmental, and;
- being accommodating to their needs (ex. gender-neutral bathrooms).

Building inclusive spaces for two-spirit Aboriginal people in your community can often mean having to combat homophobia, transphobia, sexism, colonization, and stereotypes. Two-spirit people often experience discrimination within their own communities as well as in the larger society. In building inclusive spaces it is necessary to combat these forms of discrimination and educate people about the history of two-spirit people and their roles and responsibilities historically and contemporarily within our communities.