Who Is Métis?

The recent news articles concerning the definition of Métis has brought to the forefront the debate over Métis identity.

The Métis Nation of Ontario and affiliated organizations use the following terms to define Métis;

> Métis means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry, is distinct from other Aboriginal Peoples and is accepted by the Métis Nation.
> "Historic Métis Nation" means the Aboriginal people then known as Métis or Half-Breeds who resided in Historic Métis Nation Homeland;
> "Historic Métis Nation Homeland" means the area of land in west central North America used and occupied as the traditional territory of the Métis or Half-Breeds as they were then known;
> "Métis Nation" means the Aboriginal people descended from the Historic Métis Nation, which is now comprised of all Métis Nation citizens and is one of the "aboriginal peoples of Canada" within s.35 of the Constitution Act of 1982;

The dictionary defines Métis as:

> a person of mixed blood; *especially often capitalized* **:** the offspring of an American Indian and a Person of European ancestry

The Ontario Métis Family Records Center (OMFRC) definition: Our definition is the broadest and simplest:

> Anyone with an aboriginal ancestor.
> We do not believe in defining Métis by blood quantum and we don't restrict our definition to European ancestry or specific geographical areas.

There are almost as many definitions of Métis as there are Métis organizations. I agree that the Métis defined by the MNO definition are different from other Métis, but that does not make them the only Métis. My ancestry is Algonquin and Mohawk. One MNO member once said to me: "you are metis with a small 'm' and MNO members are metis with a capital 'M'. I don't recall that the Canadian constitution made any such distinction. Nor does the dictionary.

I think the following two articles reflect the true meaning of Métis. Definitions carefully crafted by lawyers and bureaucrats fail to encompass the spirit of being Métis. We know who we are and government definitions will never change that.

Why Get a Metis Status Card?

I finally decided to stand up and be counted. Maybe the reasons don't mean much to most people. Some people asked me if I was going to get some financial break. Others just wondered why would I bother, if I'm Métis, why do I need a card to prove it. Either way, am I not Métis and always will be?? Sometimes it's not that easy to describe the reasons.

After years of hiding our heritage, after years that I'm quite sure my grandmother endured racism for the

way she looked, after years of being the only branch who was told "the family story", it's time to embrace the truth. And the truth is that we are the descendants of the fur-trade and have native ancestors. And all those family ways that we hadn't really given a name to? All those ways are Métis.

The government is not coming to get us. They are not taking us from our family. We don't have to run away and hide. We don't have to change our names to sound more this or more that. We don't have to hide our heritage to be allowed to vote, to own land, to be a citizen. We can admit who we are, and what we are is Métis. And even if my grandmother was in fact allowed these privileges, I'm sure her mother and grandmother felt their "nativeness" must be hidden for fear of having those choices taken away. That is the story I read about that is so typical of most Métis. I'm guessing that is why my great aunt was the only one who told us the family story.

I know the traditional Métis are in the west, and live in the traditional lands that were fought over by men like Louis Riel. But the fact that my fur-trading ancestors did not stay in the west, but rather took their children and moved elsewhere, and became more or less assimilated into a white world, does not make me less Métis. I am just a different kind of Métis. A southwestern Ontario one whose ancestors mingled with other Métis, trying to hide in small villages to avoid the racism dished out for the colour of their skin. Racism that was only brought on by the ridiculous notion that natives did not have a soul, that they were somehow less human or less worthy than whites.

Our world is now full of scientists who tell us that the planet is in danger. For thousands of years native Americans lived in balance with nature and in only a few generations, nature has been destroyed, perhaps forever. That is cultural wisdom that we have been brought to believe is somehow less dignified, and finally, now is proving to be accepted as having been the total opposite. Imagine for a moment the richness that the earth gave for thousands of years to aboriginal people.

We are Métis who celebrated our duality in our own ways and in our own villages. My family kept parts of our Métis culture, in their food, their music, their celebrations, their ways of life, such as hunting and fishing, their reverence for nature, their knowledge of herbs, and their views on life. And in many cases, they married other Métis who were doing the same. The traditions lived into my generation and beyond. And now I pass this on to the next generations. I want to keep it alive if I can. So I play fiddle, I sing, I fish, I collect maple sap and boil it down into syrup. We teach our kids to square-dance. I will show the next generations things to eat from nature.

So many people in North America will never prove they are Métis, and many more don't even know their "family story", and this is such a sad fact, because a whole nation of people belong to the Métis, probably so many more than we can imagine. So I will not exclude another Métis, nor hold it against them if their ancestors had no choice but to let go of their ways. If those Métis want to learn, if they want to take back the culture they lost, then they can come join in. I'm hoping others will do the same for me.

Gone are the days when Métis need to worry about being the minority of the minority. At one time considered "white" by native people, and considered "native" by white people, and not really feeling like they were wholly part of either; gone are those days. And so I do my part to show that this Métis is no longer afraid to stand up and be counted.

A few years ago I finally decided to get my Métis status card. And lucky for me, I have more than one native line to choose from, and lucky me, I have at least one line that is documented. But the reality is that many Métis lines are not provable because there were no records for many of the children of the fur trade. But that does not make them any less Métis. To say so is no better than the exclusion that aboriginals have suffered in this country for far too many generations.

Yes, my Métis card proves that I have supplied the proper genealogical information that I have native American blood. But more than that, it tells others that I am an aboriginal in a corporate world, and it is possible to live in duality, with all the respect I deserve, and all the respect I give. It breaks down barriers to help other aboriginals who have not been so

fortunate as myself. It holds me accountable for who I am, and for who I would like to be. But it also fills me with the kind of pride I grew up with, knowing that my priorities are no less important than anyone else's. So I will stand up and be counted. Finally. Anne Anderson

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Ishpeming'enzaabid

In his 2008 bestseller *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*, John Ralston Saul asks a seemingly innocuous question: "Is Canada a Métis Nation?" His answer? A very well argued 'Yes'. To take it one step further, I believe each and every Canadian must also ask: "Am I a Métis person?" Now *that* particular answer is not so clear cut. Even though Saul states somewhere else that he believes that any Canadian who can trace his or her ancestral arrival from Europe to some date before the Royal Proclamation of 1763 is by definition Métis, the answer remains elusive.

I was born in Timmins, Ontario in 1963, my mother in 1936 and her parents had been there since at least 1918. My grandmother's family (originally from Nosbonsing) is said to go back to the Métis families of Buckingham, Quebec and to the last free Algonquin Matawa bands of the early and mid 1800's. My grandmother's Native ancestry was never a secret, although it was rarely spoken of and when it was it was whispered quietly. Consequently, I grew up thinking that I was a French Canadian guy with some '*Indian*' back there somewhere. I often joked with my sister that being 'Pure Laine' Quebecois back to the 1630's on our father's side and Ontario francophone/Native on our mother's side made us about as Canadian as it gets. And that's the way it remained until many years later when I was in university in St. Catharines finishing a BA in Philosophy.

Studying philosophy has a way of making a person very curious about all kinds of things. So one evening in 1992, as I was wandering through the library, I came across a little book by John Fire Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes called *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*. I sat on the floor and read the whole thing from cover to cover right there and then. It was nothing short of a moment of inspiration for me. Here was a man, Lame Deer, who talked about his people, the Lakota Sioux, not using the past tense, but from a very real present. As I read Lame Deer's stories my Native ancestry come crashing in on me from some vague past to a very real present. That was the first time I asked myself, "Who am I?" And sitting on the carpet between the library stacks, I realized that I had no answer.

I finished my BA in Philosophy in 1993 and continued into the MA program. After a few months I met with my supervisor, Dr. Sinha, in his office. He asked me what it was that I wanted to do with my life, and I told him that I wanted to teach. He looked at me for a long time and finally said: "We have taught you all that we can here. It is time for you to move on." I was speechless. He then asked me, "You have Aboriginal ancestry right?" and I replied that yes I did. He told me that continuing in academic philosophy would be a waste of my time and that I should really be looking into Aboriginal philosophy and perhaps moving in that direction. Why did he tell me that? Intuition? Some kind of realization he had after working with me for a number of years? I still don't know. And on top of that, Aboriginal philosophy, in 1993, wasn't even a real academic area of study yet (to say the least). But what I do know is that between whispered family stories, John Fire Lame Deer's book and my supervisor's advice, it was like a huge road sign suddenly popped up along my path. And on the sign it said "Get into Native Studies!"

And so I did. In 1994, I moved to Peterborough, Ontario and began attending Trent University. By 1998 I had completed a BA and an MA in Native Studies. From that first day at Trent in September 1994 until now, not a day goes by that I don't thank Dr.Sinha for his incredibly insightful advice. The irony is that he was an 'Indian" from India, and he was advising me as I tried to make sense of the 'Indian' in my past. He died many years ago and I miss him greatly. He will always have a profound influence on my life.

Since my first days at Trent I have been privileged to meet and learn from Anishinaabe Elders and Traditional Teachers from many different traditions including a number of Midewiwin Societies (known as the Grand Medicine Society but better translated as '*The Way of the Good Heart*') as well as traditional Haudenausonee teachers (Iroquois).

I became the main helper for Ojibwe Elder *Mishcogaabowe* (Paul Bourgeois) during those early years and we continue to work together to this day. Our relationship has become, as he has stated on a number of occasions, a Spiritual Partnership. I have been incredibly fortunate to spend so much time traveling with him over the past 15 years throughout Ontario, Manitoulin Island, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota and as far as Cherokee territory in Alabama.

And all along he knew that I was constantly struggling to answer the question that propelled me, with an insatiable appetite to learn, from one ceremony to another, from one Elder to another, from one part of Indian country to another: "Who am I?" And finally in 1996 I gave him tobacco asking for his help in revealing my traditional name. After 2 years of learning many teachings and ceremonial songs, helping with various ceremonies, taking part in dozens of Sweat Lodge ceremonies, many days of Fasting and ultimately finding my place in the Native community of the Peterborough area, I finished my search with a four day Fast in the spring of1998 and had my name revealed to me: *Ishpeming'enzaabid*. In Ojibwe it means He who sees from a high place; a philosopher's name I was told. Later that summer, while at Ceremonies in Milles Lacs Ojibwe Territory in Minnesota I was given my family affiliation – Bizhiw Doodem (Lynx Clan) - by Midewiwin Head Man Albert Churchill (who passed away in 2001). For quite some time afterwards I struggled with this new name and clan, mainly I think, due to a profound sense of guilt because I was doing something forbidden in my family: talking about my Native ancestry loud enough for all people to hear rather than in quiet whispers spoken in private. I even asked my Elder and Teacher Paul Bourgeois if I could or even should identify myself as an Aboriginal man, even though most of my genetic makeup was clearly French Canadian. His answer? "The name I found for you was not a French name, it is an Anishinaabe name. It could have been French you know, but it wasn't." He went on to help me understand that identity is ultimately a state of mind. Like he had told me before I started my final four day Fast for my name, "You have to be really and truly honest when you seek the answer to the question that has been dogging you all these years."

And after all, doesn't Métisness, to borrow the term from Darcey Jerrom, speak to a very particular state of mind? After years of researching my family ancestry and more importantly finally giving up on the belief that being Métis is somehow less than being Status or non-Status Indian, I ask myself, "Am I a Métis person?" Being really and truly honest I must say: "Yes, I am Métis."

These days I am a Traditional Teacher as well as a Professor at Fleming College teaching Aboriginal History and Culture. Part of my job is to demystify the hundreds of Aboriginal spiritual societies and traditional knowledge systems in North America; to take them out of the realm of Hippie New Age and place them in their rightful place side by side with all great world philosophies and religious/spiritual traditions. And the best part of being a teacher is that I now get to encourage my students to ask themselves, "Who am I?" They usually have no idea what hit them.

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