Holding and Carrying Our Babies

A Gift-Giving Practice in Anishinaabeg Mothering Cultural Traditions

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Dans cette article, l'auteur explore les racines du don maternel dans le contexte de porter et transporter les bébés. Ce geste donne protection, confort, des chances d'apprendre, la mobilité, témoigne d'un amour inconditionnel et un accès a la vie par l'allaitement. Ce geste permet à l'enfant de dépendre des autres, à grandir, à développer une vision du monde Anishinaabeg. L'auteur montre que cette expérience de tenir un bebe est à la base des connections qui donnent un sens a la vie, qui les connecte à l'adulte Anishinaabeg, à sa famille, sa communauté et ses territoires.

> We are our children's first environment. We are responsible for bringing these new spirits through the doorway into this world. Reclaiming Indigenous traditions of pregnancy, birth, and mothering will enable our children to lead our resurgence as Indigenous Peoples, to rise up and rebel against colonialism in all its forms, to dream independence, to dance to nationhood.
> —(Anishinaabe) Leanne Simpson *Birthing an Indigenous Resurgence*

> I breathe in every day of her babyhood, the rapture of her newborn smell, the rise and fall of her belly, so tightly bound to me. My heartbeat. The nursing. Her grip on my finger. Her dainty eyes, blinking open.
> —(Cree/Métis) Kim Anderson *New Life Stirring*

For generations, the Anishinaabeg have prioritized an economy based on gift giving. We give and share gifts with each other, outsiders, and to the land as a way of demonstrating respect, honour or to gain consent. Gift giving is the foundation of Anishinaabeg governance practices. When our ancestors needed to forge an alliance with another nation the sacred tobacco (*asemaa*) and ceremony were given to mark a change in the relationship. A midwife will offer tobacco, prayers and a song to the plant she wants to harvest as a gift of exchange for life and healing. For our ceremonies, we talk to the grandfather and grandmother rocks to offer words of thanks when requesting to use them in our sweat lodge ceremonies. This economy of giving gifts in thanks and gratitude reconnect us to our ancient teachings of life, our connections to territory, and to each other as human beings. All things are alive and all things have their place in Creation. We our taught this knowledge by our mothers and grandmothers to be thankful for all the universe provides us and to gift back as a sign of gratitude.

Anishinaabeg mothers are taught by our family and midwives that with the birth of our baby (*binoojiinh*) we are given a precious gift of life and as a sign of gratitude to Creation we are expected to sustain it, nurture it, protect it, teach it, and support that life. Maternal roots of gift giving among the Anishinaabeg begin when we hold and carry our newborn infant. An Anishinaabe mother's (*maama*a) spirit is bound to the life of her child, which she cradles closely in her arms, to her breast, and to her heart. The practice of holding and carrying our babies is considered a key part of maternal responsibilities, as well as a sacred gift we give to our children in order to holistically foster their well being. Holding and carrying babies is about giving babies protection, comfort, learning opportunities, mobility, showing unconditional love, and

access to life sustaining breast milk (*doodooshaaboo*). There are a variety of ways that a baby can be held. Women (*kwewag*) carry their babies in their wombs for nine months. Then, when the baby is born the mother reaches down, lifts the baby up to her chest and holds the baby in her arms close to her heart (*dakonaawaso*). The mother will then cradle her baby to her breast to nurse (*noonaawaso*). Anishinaabeg mothers also have cultural customs around placing a baby in a moss bag (*waapijipizon*) or holding a baby in a cradleboard (*tikinaagan*). The act of placing a baby into a cradleboard (*dakobinaawaswaan*) facilitates mobility for mother and security for the baby. These two traditions are primarily meant for babies to be carried to various locations on a mother's back or in her arms. Lastly, holding and carrying customs also involve other women including older and younger women or girls, such as extended family members like grandmothers, sisters, cousins, and aunties, along with women Elders and community members. The gift of being held and carried allows a baby to depend upon others, to thrive, grow, and develop a well-rounded sense of Anishinaabeg worldview. Moreover, experiencing the gift of holding and carrying a baby lays the roots and connections that give life purpose, that connect us as adult Anishinaabeg to our family, community, and our territories.

Carrying *Spirit* in Our Wombs

Being pregnant and carrying a baby in the womb is one of the most sacred times in the life of an Anishinaabe woman (*kwe*). The womb is considered the first space manner in which a woman carries and holds her baby, thus it is a sacred time. The time spent in the womb being held so tight is essential to the development of the baby. As Virginia McKenzie points out, "The tightness and the warmth of that womb was essential to their comfort …. Babies really love to be [held tightly], they need that, they really need that tight warm feeling for a while, they always have to be kept warm" (Nahwegahbow *Springtime in n'Daki Menan* 103). Down through the generations, Anishinaabeg grandmothers and women Elders have passed on wisdom about the roots of maternal gifts, ethics, rights, duties, responsibilities, and knowledge. Maternal knowledge related to motherhood and mothering practice is called the grandmother teachings. Grandmother teachings about mothering practices are taught directly by the grannies, aunties, old ones, Elders, and midwives to those younger women at times of pregnancy. I myself received these teachings from both Elder Edna Manitowabi and from my midwives at the Tsi Non:we Ionnakeratstha Ona:grahsta' Birthing Centre, located on the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory.

On the sacredness of holding and carrying babies, the grandmother teachings guide expectant mothers to understand that the gravity of the womb acting as the first maternal space that cradles new life. In Mosom Danny Musqua's view, this sense of self, purpose, and belonging as a member of a community are all learned first from inside the womb (Anderson *Life Stages* 38). In fact, it starts at the moment of conception when the spark of life or spirit enters inside the woman's body. It is asserted in these grandmother teachings that,

> … the spirit enters the woman's body at the moment of conception. The spirit decides on the mother and father that it needs to learn from in the physical realm before going back to the Creator. The Creator makes this choice, as the Creator has developed everything in that being before the spirit's arrival. Within it are all the orders of the Creator's purpose for that spirit. So the spirit occupies the body, acts as its protector, and helps it to grow into human form. (Best Start Resource Centre *A Child Becomes Strong* 15)

Because the mother's womb acts as the space that holds and carries the baby for its nine months of development, there are traditional customs shared in the grandmother teachings that the Anishinaabeg mother is encouraged to uphold to ensure the wellbeing of the unborn baby. A pregnant woman's first duty is to ensure her own health so as to ensure the baby is born strong and healthy.

Grandmother teachings included a variety of behaviours that a pregnant woman was either supposed to do or not supposed to do while carrying a spirit in her womb. The reasoning behind these teachings is because the woman is the first environment and teacher for the unborn baby (Simpson; Solomon). Having a healthy pregnancy and womb is the first maternal gift a mother can provide her child. Women were often directed to keep a positive mindset, spirit and body, but also to avoid thinking negatively or worrying too much (Best Start *A Child Becomes Strong* 16). Additionally, pregnant women were also directed to keep active and productive.

In *Chippewa Child Life and its Cultural Background*, M. Inez Hilger writes that Anishinaabeg "Women were taught to do hard work while caring for a child and in this matter no leniency was shown them. Women who refrained from hard work might anticipate adherence of placenta after birth [and the placenta not easily passing out of the mother's womb]" (3). Also, Thomas Peacock notes that traditional Anishinaabeg people believe that pregnant women

need to eat specific wild game, fish, and plants to ensure that the good attributes of those beings were passed onto their unborn babies (27-28). Peacock also points out that there were also numerous activities that women needed to avoid as well. For example, "Rolling over in bed while pregnant was thought to cause the umbilical cord to twist and wind around the unborn baby's neck" (28). Similarly, the Best Start Resource Centre guide for parenting titled, *A Child Becomes Strong: Journeying Through Each Stage of the Life Cycle*, refers to a selection of grandmother teachings for the pregnant mother.

A few of these teachings include: (1) to be careful when taking medicines that could help or hurt the baby; (2) to be in good spaces and places that foster a peaceful mind to ensure emotional wellness; (3) food should be treated as medicine that nourishes the womb and baby; (4) sing, share stories and talk to the baby to develop their Anishinaabeg identity; (5) attend ceremonies so that the baby can develop good relationships to creation and its identity; (6) stand near a drum to allow baby to hear the songs and listen to the heartbeat of Mother Earth, and lastly; (7) speak Anishinaabemowin (16). Carrying a life inside the womb is considered a sacred activity. One of the most significant gifts a mother can give to the baby she carries is following these pregnancy teachings of the grandmothers. Grandmother teachings on pregnancy represent the foundation for a healthy holistic beginning to life for a new spirit waiting to be born.

Wrapped in a Mother's Sacred Embrace

After a mother carries her baby to term and gives birth, the next gift to her baby is the security of the mother's embrace. Thomas Peacock summarizes the sacredness of this moment: "And we were born. The doctor or nurse then cleaned us up and wrapped us in a blanket, and our mother held us outside her body for the first time" (30). The first act a mother carries out upon the birth of her child is to offer her arms out to her baby; reaching out, down, pulling her baby up into her arms, and to her breasts to receive their first taste of breast milk. The embrace of a mother is considered sacred and is recorded in our ancient Creation stories pertaining to teachings on Mother Earth (Eshkakami-kwe) as first mother to all-of-Creation.

Anishinaabe writer, cultural historian, and storyteller, Basil Johnston, writes about these teachings in his book *Ojibway Heritage.* He states,

> A mother begets a child. She nourishes him, holds him in her arms. She gives him a place upon her blanket near her bosom. A woman may give birth to many children. To all she gives food, care, and a place near her. To each she gives a portion of herself …. All are entitled to a place near her bosom in her lodge. Her gift does not diminish but increases and renews itself. (25)

At its most basic level, a mother's embrace of her baby is important because it initiates the bond between mother and baby.

Anishinaabeg cultural teachings on breastfeeding offer that breast milk is considered one of the most sacred maternal gifts a mother can provide for her child (Johnston 25). Our teachings tell us that the sacredness of a mother's milk is derived from its connections to the earth and to water *(*nibi*),* which to the Anishinaabeg represented the sacred waters or "life blood of Mother Earth" (Best Start *A Child Becomes Strong* 17). Mother Earth gives her waters to nourish all-of-Creation. As such, "Women are a direct reflection of the earth …. Water is life and women are the life givers and carriers of water" (ibid.). As new mothers perform the first act of holding their baby outside of the womb they direct their baby to breastfeed, thus ingesting the sacred, "… waters that flow within us and protect and nurture our babies" (ibid.). By holding the baby to the breast to nurse, a mother is in fact providing nourishment and protection for her baby. The milk offers the baby valuable nutrients along with protective antibodies that keep a new baby safe from illness and infections. On a spiritual level, holding the baby to the breast offers the baby,

> … their connection with Mother Earth and all that is. It allows

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> for the baby to bond with mother and with all that she represents. By breastfeeding, the baby is connecting to all of creation, further developing their emotions and spirit and enhancing their sense of belonging and identity. The nutritional value of breast milk provides a good foundation for the healthy body and mind of baby. (*ibid.*)

Being held to breastfeed allows the baby to receive the gift of the sacred waters of life that nourish, cleanse and protect new life, but also provide a valuable earthly connection to all-of-creation. The action of holding our babies to breastfeed becomes more than a mere embrace but a sacred act of *zaagi'idiwin,* which can be translated simply as love, but in fact represents a deeper meaning about the unconditional bond between two living beings. In the Seven Grandfather teachings offered by the Elders who work with the *Seven Generations Education Institute* in Kenora Ontario, *zaagi'idiwin* is defined as the, "'Unconditional Love Between One Another,' meaning all of Creation—including humans and non-humans, seen and unseen, of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Zaag: To Emerge, to Come Out, to Flow Out. Idi: In a Reciprocal Way. Win: Nominalizer. A Way it is Done" (Seven Generations Education Institute, emphasis added). In this way, *zaagi'idiwin* embodies the flowing outwards of unconditional love that bonds two beings. A mother's embrace allows her milk to carry her love to her baby in order to nourish it holistically mind, body, emotions, and spirit.

Anishinaabe-kwe scholar, artist, and activist, Leanne Simpson, describes how the first gift our children bring us as parents is that *zaagi'idiwin,* but in turn we reciprocate and teach them the power of sharing the waters of life (*Birthing an Indigenous Resurgence* 31). Simpson writes, "I nursed both children right away, and the first teaching I gave them was therefore about Sharing, the basis of our treatied relationship with other nations" (*ibid.*). Because a baby relies on its senses, the role of the mother's embrace provides nurturing through touch, smell, sight, hearing, and taste. By embracing the baby, a mother teaches the baby to use, know, and rely upon their senses to find the security to thrive.

Cradled in the Moss Bag

For our ancestors, it was common practice that newborns were held, fed, and then quickly wrapped up and put in its moss bag (*waapijipizo*n) for both comfort and safety. Mary Geniusz explains, saying,

> In the days of the Gete-Anishinaabeg, as soon as a babe was born it was blessed with Sacred Cedar Oil, bathed in warm water, dried with soft cloth or a rabbit kin, and tied into its waapijipizon, moss bag. The child was safe and snug as it had been in its mother's womb and would immediately go to sleep ….The waapijipizon has cradled our ancestors down through the years, since the great ice sheets of the glaciers covered this land. The moss that has been and is used in the moss bag is sphagnum." (158, emphasis added)

While the design and aesthetics are similar in terms of the use of hides, beading and fur decoration, the moss bags no longer hold actual moss; instead, they are constructed with modern cloth and babies wear cloth or disposable diapers. The moss bag continues to act as a tool for mothers to swaddle and protect the physical bodies of their babies in much the same way as their ancestors intended when they created this particular carrying device.

Moss bags are still used by mothers to ensure the healthy development and safety of their babies. Traditionally, Anishinaabeg mothers would use moss bags for a variety of purposes. With guidance from her aunties, mothers, grannies, and Elders, a pregnant woman was given teachings, guidance, and assistance to craft her baby's moss bag. Traditionally, as a way of preparing for that infant to come, the moss bag and cradleboard were always the first items a pregnant woman would make for her unborn child. She personally gathered necessary items and crafted her moss bag. Any item created by hand for a baby was always made with a positive state of mind so that the energies infused into the item were nurturing. Today, similar practices are maintained; however, most mothers no longer use moss and prefer the convenience of diapers. Additionally, just as our ancestors would do, a mother always begins first by, "… thinking positive thoughts about her baby and putting all her good wishes for the baby into the creation of the moss bag. The moss bag not only symbolizes but also emulates the feeling of security felt in the womb" (Best Start *A Child Becomes Strong* 22). Further, the creation of a moss bag, "…strengthens the bond between the mother and the unborn child. It puts positive energy into the bag. This protects and nurtures the baby while they are snuggled inside" (ibid.).

Teachings on the use of the moss bag emphasize that they have been traditionally used to secure a baby in swaddled manner. Prior to the use of cloth diapers and then disposable diapers, moss bags were necessary for the collection of a baby's urine and feces. The moss bag's name comes from the moss that was stuffed inside a leather hide bag and around the limbs and bottom as a baby (*ibid.*). The moss

acted to protect the baby's skin by absorbing the urine and when the baby was taken out fresh moss was placed back in the bag (*ibid.*). The moss used in the moss bags was also used for its medicinal properties. Many types of moss, including the sphagnum moss (*aasaakamig*) that grows in marshes and along shorelines, have been traditionally used by Anishinaabeg healers (*nenaandawi'iwedjig*) for its antiseptic qualities to dress wounds, and sooth and heal rashes (Geniusz 158; Kavasch and Barr 15). Therefore, moss made an ideal filler for the moss bag to prevent rashes on a baby's bottom. Sphagnum moss is also purportedly sterile and also,

> … seems to wick moisture away from the baby's skin and the tiny dry particles of moss act almost like a talcum powder so that the baby's skin stays smooth and dry. Feces is absorbed and enclosed in a wad of moss. Because of these properties, as well as the fact that the moss is slightly acidic and is reported to contain small amounts of iodine, sphagnum can be helpful to prevent and heal diaper rash (Elliott).

Other soft plant fibres used in the moss bags included cattail (apakweshkway) fluff or shredded bark (Kavasch and Barr 15; Densmore 49).

As record of these traditions, in 1932, the ethnographer A. Irving Hallowell travelled to Lake Pikangikum in northwestern Ontario and documented the use of moss bags and cradleboards by Anishinaabeg mothers. He wrote, "Babies were still snugly strapped to their cradleboards, being carried on these useful devices on their mothers' backs. Sphagnum moss, so intimately associated with them because the Indians had discovered its highly absorbent and deodorant properties, could be seen drying in the sun in almost every camp" (9). Similarly, in 1929, American anthropologist and ethnographer Francis Densmore wrote in her book, *Chippewa Customs*, that:

> In old times a baby wore little or no clothing, being surrounded by moss, which, with the birch-bark tray, was removed when necessary. Wood moss was occasionally used, but the moss in most common use was that found in the cranberry marshes. It was dried over the fire to destroy insects, then rubbed and pulled apart until it was soft and light. In cold weather a baby's feet were wrapped in rabbit skin with the hair inside, or the soft down of cat-tails was placed around them. (49)

Densmore reveals that the moss bag has many nurturing influences, which were used by mothers to support and protect their baby's health.

Today, the tradition of placing a baby in a bag is still practiced and is making a resurgence in Anishinaabeg communities that lost the knowledge for a time due to residential schools and acculturation. Best Start Resource Centre's report, *A Child Becomes Strong: Journeying Through Each Stage of Life Cycle* states that the use of a moss bag supports the healthy development of contemporary First Nations children by promoting a calm demeanour in a baby because its arms, legs, and full body are tightly restrained(22). Being swaddled in such a manner mimics the arms of a mother's embrace. The moss bag is put directly into the cradleboard for further restraint and easy mobility. Additionally, in a newsletter published by the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre's, the holistic benefits of the moss bag are described:

> longer sleeps, since the baby wouldn't jerk and wake up; keeping the child's backbone and legs straight, further strengthening the neck muscles; sharpening their gifts of vision, hearing and awareness; and being stimulated by their environment and family. Babies were allowed to see the world as mom and dad saw it, but since they were also kept close to their mothers, they felt secure and safe. ("Tikinagan - Moss Bags")

By using a moss bag a mother not only ensures healthy holistic development, but also passes on important traditional values to the child. The Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre's newsletter acknowledges that it is often difficult for First Nations parents to live traditional lifestyles in a

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contemporary world; however, by revitalizing practices like the moss bag, Anishinaabeg can work at, "empowering each other and our children with knowledge of our culture, language, and history … [and strengthening] our values and our families. Also, as we preserve and retain our cultural strength we become better equipped to live with a challenging and ever changing world" (ibid.).

Carried On Our Backs: The Cradleboard

Anishinaabeg mothers have always used cradleboards (*tikinaaganan*) in the care of infants. As one Anishinaabeg grandmother teaching tells us, "*Pane gwa gii bi objikaaznaa'an tiginaaganan Anishinaabeg.* The people have always used cradleboards" (Ojibwe.net).

Supporting this teaching is the wisdom embedded in the Creation stories involving the use of the cradleboard. In the story "A Gust of Wind," one of the first Anishinaabeg women on Earth used a cradleboard to carry Nanaboozho the trickster and his twin brother, Stone Boy (Erdoes and Ortiz 151). The survival and continuity of cultural customs related to cradleboard creation and use show the relevance of these traditions through the generations (Nahwegahbow 8). Anishinaabe scholar, Brenda Child, notes that while colonization has negatively impacted many aspects of traditional ways of life, contemporary Anishinaabeg women have purposefully continued cradleboard design and creation as gifts to their children, which "suggests something about the boards' cultural value, not just their utility" (Child *Holding Our World Together* 16).

Over generations, the cradleboard became an instrument of motherhood for Indigenous women across Turtle Island. Cradleboard aesthetics varied from family to family and mother to mother. As with many of the family objects intended for childrearing, each individual mother was the architect and craftsperson to design and make the cradleboards (Lyford *Ojibwa Crafts* 35; Kavasch and Barr 14). Grandmother teachings teach us that, "*Bebkaan igo gonemaa daa ezhi naagaadoon nindan tiginaaganan.* The cradleboards are all unique "(Ojibwe.net). Each Anishinaabeg mother created her infant's cradleboard to reflect her identity, her worldview, her clan, and her family's knowledge. Although the traditional Anishinaabeg style would dictate design aesthetic, the mother puts personal symbology into the adornment. The making of a cradleboard is a special activity that a mother, along with the help of her partner, family, or community, undertook as a sacred gift to the new infant. Cradleboards were treasured items by both mother and infant. Supporting this point, Richard Janulewicz offers that, "The cradleboard was to the Native mother as the shield, bow, and arrow were to the warrior" (37). Cradleboards were not just a woman's instrument, but more specifically a maternal instrument to carry out mothering practices and customs. Furthermore, for the baby, the cradleboard was their home and safe space from which they viewed the world.

Because of their uniqueness and value to the women, families, and community at large, cradleboards were often passed down through the generations from mother-to-mother (Kavasch and Barr 15). As a symbol of maternal care, cradleboards represented "security symbols" (*ibid.*). Kavasch and Barr offer that, "[m]any mothers recall their older toddlers running to hold or sit with their cradleboards during anxious times" (15). The symbolic nature of the cradleboard as carriers of the nation's children cannot be underestimated. Mothers literally carried the future of their nations strapped to their back or cradled in their arms.

Cradleboard design was determined using materials already established by traditional practice or dependent on materials available in the immediate environment. Nahwegahbow writes that, "[t]he two main elements that construct the tikinaagan are true to its Anishinaabemowin name: *tik* meaning tree or wood, referring to the carved wooden backboard, frame and curved bow; and naagan meaning bowl or vessel, alluding to the cover, bands or moss bag that hold the baby" (61 emphasis added). The *tikineyaab*, or the cradleboard coverings (i.e. wrappings and ties used to bind the baby to the cradleboard), were often carefully and ornately beaded by the mothers. Cradleboards were made from different kinds of woods, including cedar (*giizhik*), basswood (*wiigob*), or ash (*baapaagimaak*) (Peacock 37). Francis Densmore the following details on the construction of Anishinaabeg cradleboards:

> The cradleboard … consisted of a board about 24 inches long with a curved piece of wood at one end to confine the child's feet and a hoop at right angles above the other end…. A light rod was fastened loosely to one side of the cradleboard and to this were attached the two binding bands, about six inches wide, which were pinned or tied over the child. In the old days the upper end of the board was cut in points and painted red or blue, and the entire structure was held together by thongs. Inside the curved wood at the front of the cradle board was birch back of the same shape filled with soft moss. The hoop above the child's head served as a support for a blanket in winter or for a thin cloth in summer, thus protecting the child's head from the

weather. On this hoop were hung small articles intended as charms or for the child's amusement. The leather strap fastened near the hoop enabled the mother to carry it on her back…. The binding bands were formerly of list cloth and decorated only on the portion above the cradle board, but as beads and worsted

teachings tell us that, "*Niibina a mshkwiiziwin binoojiins giindenaan tiganaaganing enji gaanawenjigaazod.* The baby grew strong in the cradle while being cared for in the cradle" (Ojibwe.net). Anishinaabeg mothers wrapped their babies into a moss bag and coverings first, then securely strapped them to the thin cushioned cradleboard for warmth and restful

holtzer characterizes the space of the cradleboard as a "womb with a view" (Oberholtzer "*A Womb with a View*" 267). The cradleboard is described by Oberholtzer as an extension of the feeling of warmth and security that the infant has while still in utero (*ibid.*). Next, the firm frame provided protection for the fragile spine and head of the infant. Proximity to the

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braid became more common the decoration was extended over the entire length. The women took great pride in the decoration of these bands. Strips of hide were used in early days to hold the bands in place; these were followed by flat woven braid about an inch wide, made of yarn, one such braid being tied over each band (48-49).

A cradleboard was also additionally both the security blanket and a child's first clothing for that first year of life; therefore, the mother put a lot of careful thought and reflection into its construction for the comfort, ease of use, safety, and adornment (Densmore 48). Everyone from the community sees the work a woman and her family put into the creation of a cradleboard, so it needs to be aesthetically pleasing, as well as functional. Moreover, good construction of the cradleboard was vital to the safety of the infant, so great care was taken to build the cradle to last a very long time.

Traditionally, cradleboards were seen as a maternal tool used to foster healthy children. Grandmother

sleep where their bodies were secured tightly to ensure they would not be shaken about or wake themselves up. A mother's gift to her infant with the use of the cradleboard is closely rooted to healing and wellbeing. Kavasch and Barr explain that,

> [h]ealing is not only connected to special events; it is imbedded in the everyday. Many practical objects have spiritual significance…. According to some beliefs, a child had many nurturing influences. The first is the earth, who gives life to all beings; the second is the woman who gives birth to him; and the third is the father, who makes life possible. Finally, there is the cradleboard, which nurtures and protects him during his earliest days (13-14).

Cradleboards have always been critical to an Anishinaabeg infant's first months of life, providing life essentials and a space to grow in peaceful security. For instance, the cradleboard kept the infant warm and snug. Further, it mimicked the environment of the womb. Cath Ober-

mother's back and her lungs actually matches the infant's breathing, heart rate, and life experience with the mother's, thus training the infant to properly breath. The board also kept the infant's backbone and legs straight, to strengthen the neck muscles and provide an opportunity for the infant to enhance their vision and hearing senses while being stimulated by his/her environment and family. Close proximity enables mothers to easily nurse and foster the bonds of love and trust.

Moreover, cradleboards provided necessary physical and spiritual protection for an infant. In Anishinaabeg culture, infants as new spirits to this world are seen as being close to the spirit world. There are many teachings and stories about the spirits of infants being taken or returned to the Spirit World. Babies were seen as gifts to the Anishinaabeg, and through their travel from the Spirit World at birth they maintained close ties to that realm (Simpson *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back* 123). The soft round spot on the top of an infant's head acts as a reminder of this openness that they have to the Spirit World (Anderson "New Life Stirring" 21).

Anishinaabeg mothers are advised to avoid places or situations that might attract bad energies or spirits to their infants and take the spirit of the infant. To protect their children, mothers adorn the moss bad with protective beaded images or put spiritual ornaments on the cradle to ward off bad spirits.

The coverings of the cradleboard and the moss bag were fashioned with spiritual symbols and designs of protection (i.e. clan symbols, spirit beings like thunderbirds or water panthers, animals, birds, natural forces in nature), so as to seek blessings for the wearer by acknowledging the powers of spiritual *other-than-human* beings and maintaining right relations with those forces (Smith; Penney 11). Honouring and maintaining right relations were exhibited through the beadwork and quillwork images that were fashioned onto the cradleboard. These designs acted as physical examples of thanks or requests for blessings. From giving thanks came good energies and protection from powers that might do harm to the baby.

Francis Densmore wrote about the use of protective ornaments and toys on cradleboards, or what she called "charms" made for infants (51-52). She learnt from her informants that there were tangible and intangible spiritual energies that required the use of charms as a spiritual medicine to combat the ill effects caused by some of these spiritual forces. Mothers would often tie a small navel cord pouch or bag to the cradleboards containing items like the umbilical cord of the baby or medicines like tobacco (*semaa*). Anderson notes that umbilical cords, "signified connections that were made between the child and his or her relations" (*Life Stages* 51). Anishinaabe-kwe writer, Louise Erdrich, described the cord as a lifeline when she wrote that, "The red rope is the hope of our nation. It pulls, it sings, it snags, it feeds, it holds. How it holds" (6). These pouches would remain on the cradleboard till the time the baby was done with the cradleboard, which was usually some time after the first or second year of life.

Another kind of ornamentation included the dreamcatcher (*bawaajige-nagwaaganan)*. Densmore described the dreamcatcher as appearing like a tiny spider web, hung from the upright curved bow of the cradle (52). Anishinaabeg dreamcatchers were made of red willow, which were then curved in the shape of a teardrop. Thomas Peacock shares that the dreamcatchers were constructed from, "a hoop made of willow or the small branches of other softwood trees, and a spider net made of sinew" (37). In the way that a spider's web is designed to physically entangle and ensnare insects, dreamcatchers were hung from an infant's cradleboard's bow to spiritually protect the baby by catching all bad dreams, and any, "evil or malevolent force[s] includ[ing] colds, illness and bad spirits" that could cause harm to this sensitive new life (Oberholtzer *"Net Baby Charms"* 318). Peacock further states that, "[t]he dreamcatcher was to catch bad dreams and allow only good dreams to come through to the baby" (37-38).

Cradleboards also offered physical protection for the infant, particularly in those very vulnerable first months of life when their bodies are most fragile. Cradleboards are constructed with a broad, firm protective frame for the protection of the infant's spine, as well as an upright rounded bow that arcs out from the cradleboard to cover over the infant's head, similar to a canopy or a modern-day baby carriage hood. The intended purpose of this headpiece is used to protect the infant. Using a hide, cloth, or a blanket in winter, the headpiece protects against the harsh weather or from biting insects (i.e. mosquitos and blackflies) (Lambert 364-65). Additionally, the curved bow provides extra head protection in case anything bumps against the cradleboard, or if it were to tip over onto the ground. Bruce White even light heartedly referred to the curved headpiece as the "crash bar" for the cradleboard (21).

The Anishinaabeg, along with other Indigenous nations around Turtle Island (North America), "… believed that the cradleboard prevented humpback, bowlegs, and bad posture" (Kavasch and Barr 15). A number of scholars have noted that mothers would place their babies off the ground to provide them with protection from animals, insects, or other small children that might knock them over, with the additional benefit of the wind rocking the infants to either calm or sleep. To this, Kavash and Barr have written that, "[w]hile the mother worked in the dwelling, village, or field, she could stand the cradleboard nearby or hang it from a sturdy tree" (ibid.).

Similarly, Sister Mary Inez Hilger offers that, "The mother can set the baby up in its cradleboard anywhere … [such as] against a tree or wigwam or any place, or she can hang it on a tree [by the bow] so dogs can't bother the baby while she is busy making sugar or picking berries. The baby can't get hurt if it falls over: the bow protects its head and body" (23). Also, Johann Georg Kohl notes, "You may roll an Indian *tikinaagan* over as much as you please, but the child cannot be injured" (Kohl *Kitchi-Gami* 7). The convenience of the cradleboard structure allows Anishinaabeg mothers to minimize potential harm or injuries to the infant, which gives her and her family peace of mind.

Additionally, cradleboards also work to instil positive attributes into the infant's life right from the beginning. Cradleboards offered an infant and mother beneficial traits and awareness essential to survival,

including unconditional love. The point of these skills were to instil essential knowledge necessary for their survival (Janulewicz 4).

Cradleboards allowed a mother to give her infant full exposure to Anishinaabeg life, the happenings of the community, and people who could provide key teachings to shape them into productive members of the community as adults. Janulewicz, quoting Marz Minor and Nono Minor, offers that Indigenous babies placed in cradleboards, " … spent most of their first year in a cradle" (4). This time period was considered training in values of restraint, discipline, and endurance. Anishinaabeg mothers valued the ways in which the cradleboard developed infants' physical and mental capacities (Anderson *Life Stages and Native Women* 59). Henry R. Schoolcraft noted that a First Nations child's, "first lesson in the art of endurance" came from the restraint offered by the cradleboard's tightly wrapped coverings (390). The time when an infant was kept in the cradleboard thus exposed an Anishinaabeg child to important educational opportunities. Peacock explains that key life lessons came from,

> … simply spending time in the cradleboard. Here babies learned skills in observation and listening by watching the dance of life around them - the movement of clouds and grasses, the chatter of birds, the play and work of squirrels and other small animals, the voices and actions of people. Here they first learned of the sun and moon, of stars clusters. Here they first observed the seasons and how day changes to night. Perhaps most important, adults would spend much time talking to the babies, telling stories and singing to foster their imagination, which would eventually lead to dreams and visions. (38-39)

Traditional teachings tell us that when the infant was tightly laced into their cradleboard, they developed both an awareness of self and a sense of belonging both to a people and a place. Diamond Jenness wrote that, "[a] child required the tenderest of care…. Both before and after it was born the mother talked to it, teaching the soul and shadow such information as the habits of the animals it would encounter as it grew up" (90). Basil Johnston explains further that these early teachings were often shared through story, song, and "imaginative descriptions" of the natural world (122). These early stories were often used by mothers not just to teach, but to also "… induce sleep; the more remote and ultimate object was to foster dreams, the simplest and first form of vision…. Stories were told slowly and graphically to allow a child to enkindle … imagination" (ibid.). Francis Densmore records a specific song that was sung by mothers rocking their babies in their cradleboards, which included the syllables "*we, we*" which translates to "swinging" (50). Dreaming, imagination, and vision were very highly respected attributes for life lived as an Anishinaabe, and our children were nurtured to explore these abilities through their sleep and rest in their cradleboards so that they might gain perspective on their futures.

Cradleboards allowed the babies to interact with family and community members. Janulewicz notes that, "Indian children were much prized and loved, so their grandparents and other family members would play with them, and would teach them to talk and walk when they were out of the cradle" (4). Anishinaabeg mothers made certain to expose their children to other children, adults, and the older generations in order to give them opportunities to learn how to be Anishinaabe. The grandmother teaching educates us that, "Mii geye wii noondaan waamdaan miinwaa geye wii gikendaan aapichi zaagikchigaazon. This also was done so babies would see things, hear things and learn while being loved by someone" (Ojibwe.net). A mother's gift extended to the gift of bonding with and forming relationships with family members and community. Older children also enjoy carrying their infant siblings in the cradleboards and, traditionally, girls were given dolls with miniature versions of cradleboards in order to practice for the day they too had their own children to care for (Kavasch and Barr 15). Other women in the family hold, carry, or watch over the cradleboards to give a mother a break, to spend time with the new baby, or to teach the young one through story and song (Peacock 35-36). Allowing the family to participate in the carrying and holding of babies reinforces those grandmother teachings that tell us we are all responsible to this circle of life. Family and community member's roles in taking care of a baby in the cradleboard represents the understanding that the needs of our children must be considered and met by every individual, family, and community member if we are to survive as a people.

The time eventually comes when the cradleboard is laid aside. Laying aside the cradle because a baby is too big or has learned to walk on their own offers its own gifts and teachings for both mother and baby. At the end of the first year of life or when a baby was done being carried in the cradleboard due to physical growth, the mother would perform a ceremony of closure. The ceremony included taking the pouch holding the umbilical cord and medicines off the cradleboard and burying the baby's umbilical cord (odiseyaab) on

the home territory. Burying the cord pouch would then symbolize the continued connection of the baby to their ancestral homeland and Mother Earth (Peacock 37). The burying of the umbilical cord signified that a new stage was beginning where the mother would gift the baby with new knowledge of how to walk in this world as an Anishinaabe. Peacock states that this ceremony, " … signified that it was time for the baby to develop as an individual and to someday go off on its own, apart from its mother" (Janulewicz 4). After the ceremony is performed, the cradle is put away or hung up till it is needed for the next child. Lastly, the baby's feet are allowed to walk on the ground and everyone celebrates this next stage of the child's growth.

Concluding Thoughts

Upon reflection, the maternal gifts we provide our children are not as great as the gifts they offer us. While we carry and hold our children in order to provide, nurture, and protect, they in turn hold us, teach us, and inspire us everyday. Our Elders advise us that children are our *best* gifts and they can teach us so much about the sacredness of life. Anishinaabe-kwe Elder, Freda Macdonald, states that, "Well I believe that the child, each and every child, is a gift from the Creator and it's your responsibility to take care of that gift" (Best Start *Supporting the Sacred Journey* 28). Leanne Simpson writes that the young ones are our "small teachers" (Simpson *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back* 122). In the Anishinaabeg nation, children have always been cherished and considered, " … highly respected people, valued for their insights" and for what they could teach both their family and community members (Simpson *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back* 122). As our grandmother teachings tell us, our children possess special gifts of creativity, imagination and dreaming, and have the ability to discover, to lead and to revitalize the cultures of their ancestors. Asserting our traditional maternal teachings, customs, and practices allows our children and nations to continue forward into the future. Our Elders lived during a time when residential schools were a part of their childhood and succeeding generations suffered the loss of traditions that were forgotten or put aside. By perpetuating the ancient traditions of our ancestors related to carrying and holding our infants, including breastfeeding, moss bags, and cradleboards, Anishinaabeg mothers are fostering cultural continuity, as well as revitalization and reconciliation for future generations.

By continuing to practice traditional maternal customs Anishinaabeg mothers are empowering each other and their children. Further, as Anishinaabeg mothers, we can protect, preserve, and retain our maternal strength and we can also become better equipped to live with a challenging and ever changing world. As an Anishinaabe mother of two small girls, Elder Mary Lee reminds me that the gifts we give our children reflect back on us and enrich our lives:

> A newborn is very powerful, the greatest of all teachers. They can sense things that are not the norm, and let you know. And they continue to teach us as they grow. For example, they will crawl, stand, fall down and get up again. You don't just get up once and walk forever, you will fall, and you will have to get up again and again. (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre)

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