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## AKIN: THE WHOLE OF IT

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**Abstract:** Infusing the arts in scholarly work offers rich insights as well as personal and professional benefits.

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In winter, cloud cover or snowfall can blur the line between sky and water. And, in summer, the blues of the sky and the open ocean will occasionally reflect one another. It's a phenomenon both elemental and inexpressible. It's equally impossible to describe my reaction when I encounter a deer on the path. The animal stops, we stare at one another, and I feel the jolt of species communication: I see you seeing me.

How often do we blur lines? How often do we see—or try to see—with the eyes of the other? How often do we rest comfortably in the liminal spaces between phenomena?

Much of my working life as a researcher and scholar was devoted to reinforcing processes of differentiation. We all know the hierarchical nature of the academy, the tyranny of grading, the insistence on good-better-best, from initials after our names to wearing distinguishing colours on our formal garb. Such ranking and ordering prevent us from honouring, for example, the talents of the trilingual sessional instructor who trained as a concert pianist but can't find a full-time position. The security found in order can often reinforce research practices that privilege the well-trodden road rather than the adventure of new paths. It was a hardening of the categories, I often joked, although I rarely found the situation amusing.

Years ago, my centenarian aunt, who'd always wanted to know the story behind her grandmother's tragic death in Northern Manitoba, urged me to research our past. In the process, I found six generations of Indigenous grandmothers descending from the Ininiwak of James Bay. I learned about the Cree concept of *wahkohtowin*, which gave me a possible explanation for my life-long instinct to choose wholeness over separateness, to invite the lessons of liminality over the satisfaction of certainty, to focus on connection and cooperation rather than difference and division. Those beliefs aren't exclusive to Indigenous people, obviously, but they are a corrective to what I experienced as the academy's resistance to artful or creative approaches to inquiry. Doesn't the wholeness of human inquiry include the aesthetic, the rational, the practical, and more? Understanding *wahkohtowin*, the kinship in all creation, changes everything—about human interaction with other humans and with the earth, about our approach to ideas and to inquiry, about the value of humility in our encounters. It means honouring the many rhythms of the planet and its inhabitants, of navigating relationships with those around us in ways less antagonistic and more cooperative and hospitable.

Ah, such naivete, right? Campfire Kumbaya and "We are the World" (Jackson & Richie, 1985), right? Perhaps. But I have learned such a response to the idea of choosing kinship over division exemplifies the issue. I don't believe "anything goes"; skill and artfulness matter in all we do. But why fear the many ways of learning and knowing? Why the need for control? Differences of expression exist, but why resist

them? It's ironic, too. The more we engage in (or learn about) an art we don't typically practice—whether it's music, dance, sculpture, photography, painting or theatre, for example—the more we stimulate our minds, see the world from another perspective, and foster brain plasticity. When we return to our own form of expression, we and our work are enriched.

The other day I saw a former colleague, now retired, ahead of me in the checkout line. His groceries were few and modest. I recalled his agitated, reddened face years ago over the approval of a student's inclusion of poetry in her thesis and wondered what matters to him now. On the drive home, I saw geese gracefully milling about in the still-icy water of the cove. An image to start a poem, I thought, then considered researching their flight paths. I thought briefly of stopping to take a photograph. If I composed music, the moment could be a line in a song.

But perhaps they are already a song, and I've not yet learned to listen to it.

## REFERENCES

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