

BEING AWESTRUCK THROUGH THE ANI TO PISI ENACTMENT

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Pkostouros@mtroyal.ca**Abstract**

On September 25, 2024, our university, Mount Royal, hosted its second Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb event. “Ani to pisi,” a Blackfoot creation story shared by Elder Roy Bear Chief and passed down from his late brother, teaches profound human interconnectedness. It describes a web surrounding humanity that vibrates to signal when someone needs help or when it is time to gather and celebrate. Elder Bear Chief shared this teaching with post-secondary students to support relational learning and community building. To embody the story, approximately 500 students, staff, faculty, and community members gathered to form a large Human Spiderweb. This article builds on a 2023 pilot study in which survey data were collected after the first Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb, in 2023, and analyzed using the Awe Experience Scale. The results revealed three primary themes: collective effervescence, feelings of awe, and strengthened commitment to reconciliation. Participants described a deep sense of unity and renewed dedication to

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Indigenization and decolonization efforts. These results suggest that Ani to pisi offers more than a symbolic gathering. As a living Indigenous teaching and relational practice, it provides a powerful means of cultivating awe, belonging, and reconciliation within our university's learning community.

Résumé

Le 25 septembre 2024, notre université, Mount Royal, a accueilli la deuxième édition de l'événement *Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb*. « Ani to pisi », récit de création pied-noir transmis par l'aîné et Roy Bear Chief et hérité de son défunt frère, enseigne l'interconnexion profonde entre les êtres humains. Ce récit décrit une toile entourant l'humanité, dont les vibrations signalent lorsqu'une personne a besoin d'aide ou lorsqu'il est temps de se rassembler pour célébrer. L'aîné Bear Chief a partagé cet enseignement avec des étudiant·es du postsecondaire afin de favoriser l'apprentissage relationnel et le développement du sentiment de communauté. Afin d'incarner ce récit, environ 500 étudiant·es, membres du personnel, professeur·es et membres de la communauté se sont réunis pour former une vaste « toile humaine ». Cet article s'appuie sur une étude pilote menée en 2023, au cours de laquelle des données de sondage ont été recueillies à la suite du premier événement *Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb*, puis analysées à l'aide de l'*Awe Experience Scale*. Les résultats ont fait émerger trois thèmes principaux : l'effervescence collective, le sentiment d'émerveillement et le renforcement de l'engagement envers la réconciliation. Les participant·es ont décrit un profond sentiment d'unité ainsi qu'un engagement renouvelé envers les démarches d'autochtonisation et de décolonisation. Ces résultats suggèrent qu'*Ani to pisi* constitue bien davantage qu'un simple rassemblement symbolique. En tant qu'enseignement autochtone vivant et pratique relationnelle, il offre un puissant moyen de cultiver l'émerveillement, le sentiment d'appartenance et la réconciliation au sein de la communauté d'apprentissage universitaire.

Introduction

“Ani to pisi” is a Blackfoot creation story which has been enacted as a Spiderweb in human form. Enacting Ani to pisi speaks to Mount Royal University's (MRU) commitment to the reconciliation of the relationships we have with Indigenous communities, particularly the Blackfoot since MRU is situated on Treaty 7 territory. Indigenous peoples have long been aware of the importance of coming together as a community and how doing so will bring humanity closer together and increase our wellness. We will add that coming together and being part of something that honours Indigenous teachings can also inspire awe.

Situating Ourselves as Researcher

All of the participants in this project live, work, and play on the traditional Blackfoot territory of Treaty 7. Elder Roy Bear Chief, who was involved in this research, is from the

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Siksika Nation. He has received two honorary doctorates and numerous other awards, including the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal. Elder Bear Chief is a residential school survivor whose 10 years in that system left a lasting impact, and made for an experience that still resonates in his mind. He is currently the Espoom taah, or Helper, with the Faculty of Health Community and Education at MRU where this research took place. Two of the researchers, Chelan McCallion and Patricia Kostouros are faculty members who implement Ani to pisi in classes and take up this teaching in their lives. They were already engaged in teaching and writing about being awestruck and saw an opportunity to demonstrate what we already knew; that being engaged in Ani to pisi is an experience of being awestruck. Students, Emma DeCecco, Tia Wells and Manprett Dhillon, who engaged in this research were an integral part of the second enactment of Ani to pisi and wanted to share in bringing awareness of Ani to pisi beyond our institution. They wanted to show that it is possible to actively engage in “ReconciliAction.” Elder Bear Chief often says, “Everyone is welcome in the Spiderweb.” This allows both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to participate together to enact a traditional Blackfoot story.

Being Awestruck

The research presented in this article is based on the expanding body of evidence that suggests that awe is a unique emotional experience that significantly shapes how individuals perceive and make sense of the world around them. Dr. Edward Bonner and Dr. Harris Friedman (2011), both non-Indigenous researchers and psychotherapists, stated that awe, though its meaning is shrouded in ambiguity, is often used to describe experiences that are deeply meaningful and otherwise indescribable. Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt (2003), both psychologists specializing in social psychology, stated that, historically, awe has been broken down into two features: vastness and the need for accommodation. Simply put, stimuli that are perceived to be larger than the self evoke awe, and in order for us to make sense of the experience, new mental models are needed (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe is often found in people’s experiences of natural occurrences, such as viewing a large mountain range or the northern lights. This is not to say that awe can only be elicited by large, monumental events in the natural world. Rather, simple things in themselves can induce feelings of awe in an individual if they are aware enough of the experience, such as a child’s laughter or a seemingly simple work of art or music.

The individual’s sense of self is a large factor in the stimulation of the awestruck experience. Silvia and Fayn (2015), researchers primarily in the field of psychology, found that even though awe differs cross-culturally, it is generally believed that one’s openness to taking part in new experiences contributes to an increased likelihood that one will experience awe. Piff et al. (2015) pursued psychological research into awe and its link to prosocial behaviour. Humans have developed several systems that make it easier to live in social collectives; these systems promote prosociality and lessen the focus on the self and its interests (Piff et al., 2015). The feeling that one is a part of something greater than oneself, such as a community, a culture,

the human species, or nature, has been linked to awe (Piff et al., 2015). As it applies to the discussion in this article, being awestruck has been attributed to the sense of self and prosociality in relation to community and reconciliation practices, such as those associated with the Blackfoot creation story of Ani to pisi and a Human Spiderweb enactment of the story held at a post-secondary institution.

The Blackfoot creation story of Ani to pisi was passed down to Elder Bear Chief from his late brother, Clement. The story emphasizes interconnectedness between all beings on the planet, by way of a Spiderweb that envelopes the earth. When there is trouble along the web, one strand will vibrate, which will signal others to come to the aid of the person or people in need. When there is no trouble, the web remains calm. Elder Bear Chief had a vision for a Spiderweb composed entirely of humans connected to one another. Following signals and drumbeats from traditional Blackfoot drummers, the participants move as one to create vibrations along the strands and circles of the web. As the enactment progresses, the cues switch from drumbeats to song, as participants join hands in one large collective round dance.

There is an acceptance of the idea that, as adults, we become rigid in our ways of thinking and quite often neglect opportunities through which we can truly become immersed in the awestruck experience (McCallion & Kostouros, 2024). But what is often overlooked is the physiological benefits of an experience of awe. Bai et al. (2021) proposed the idea that daily encounters with awesome experiences have the potential to reduce stress levels in the individual when there is a shift from the sense of self towards the collective. McCallion and Kostouros (2024) suggested that awe can be utilized as a mental health intervention among children and youth when they are guided past the mundane and shown how to appreciate the extraordinary, no matter how little it may be. Monroy and Keltner (2022) spoke to the idea that awe can be used as a pathway to pursue better mental and physical health through natural and spiritual experiences but also through the act of collective effervescence. The Human Spiderweb, Ani to pisi, enactment not only connects a significantly large group of people, but it invites them to participate in movement in unison. The participants are transformed as soon as they are gathered together. The contents of their consciousness shifts. Collective concerns, shared ideas, customs, and collective ideals replace the utilitarian and individual concerns that predominate awareness in day-to-day existence (Rimé & Páez, 2023).

Experiencing awe through the lens of a Blackfoot creation story comes with its own Indigenous theoretical frameworks. Keltner and Yuria Celidwen (2023) found that there are two foundational concepts to look at when we consider self and prosociality through an Indigenous lens: kin relationality and ecological belonging. Worldwide Indigenous peoples commonly hold beliefs that kin relationality manifests in ways of being, or theories of being, which accepts that living things belong to an expansive collection of systems, including “local ecosystems,” “cosmic systems,” and relationship to “Lands” (Celidwen & Keltner, 2023, p. 3). The idea of Indigenous self-construal, or identity perception, as a part of a responsive collective ecosystem is at the heart of ecological belonging (Celidwen & Keltner, 2023). Spiritual pursuits ingrained in oral and collective narratives, such as languages, storytelling, rituals and rites of passage, songs

or ceremonial dances, law and governance, and lifeways, endorse and support kin relationality and ecological belonging (Celidwen & Keltner, 2023).

Celidwen is a psychological researcher whose work focuses on the integration of Indigenous worldviews into the psychological sciences. Keltner's expansive work in human emotion and his study of prosociality across cultures contributed to his collective research into the concept of awe. These authors further situate kin relationality and ecological belonging within a broader cultural psychology of awe and transcendence. Celidwen and Keltner (2023) argue that Indigenous experiences of awe are not merely individual emotional states but relational events that reaffirm one's embeddedness within kin networks, land, and cosmological systems. Awe, in this framework, expands the sense of self beyond ego-boundaries and reinforces obligations to community and ecosystem. In the Indigenous context, awe often strengthens prosocial responsibility.

Celidwen and Keltner (2023) describe how ceremonial practices, land-based rituals, and collective storytelling function as culturally patterned elicitors of awe that recalibrate perception toward interconnectedness. These practices are not symbolic add-ons to identity but mechanisms through which ecological belonging is continually enacted and renewed. In this way, kin relationality becomes both a way of being and a regulatory system that shapes moral action. Self-construal, therefore, is inseparable from land, ancestry, and community governance structures (Celidwen & Keltner, 2023).

When we consider these two concepts—kin relationality and ecological belonging—in relation to the awestruck experience, it becomes clear that how the self is situated within the universe is integral to how one participates in awe. There is an inherent need to be situated within a larger system and to be aware of this situatedness in order to genuinely absorb the given experience. The telling of “Ani to pisi” is a spiritual pursuit, as is its enactment in the Human Spiderweb, as it is the physical embodiment of storytelling. Using an Indigenous story to initiate awe promotes the idea of collective consciousness and the sense that all beings and phenomena are in a state of constant relationality (Celidwen & Keltner, 2023). This relationality is demonstrated with the Human Spiderweb enactment of “Ani to pisi,” as it encourages individuals to become one with each other to create something vast and larger than the self. In so doing, the enactment contributes to a sense of collective effervescence through movement and the awestruck experience, due to the sheer size and magnitude of the event. The physical process of linking hands with others encourages individuals to become one.

Methodology

Before embarking on this project we approached Elder Bear Chief about conducting the research, and he was in favour. He met with us a few times to help ensure we were conducting the research in a good way. All of us believed that this research project could show how opportunities like this enactment not only lead to being awestruck but act as a form of reconciliation. We were all motivated to bring the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation

Calls to Action (2015) to life, which is something we integrate into teaching and learning practices, as does our post-secondary institution. We believed we brought the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (2015) to life when we fostered an opportunity for traditional Indigenous knowledge to be honoured and shared in an educational setting.

In this research we asked participants about their experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon; therefore, we conducted a qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We sought to gain the lived experiences of participants in an enactment of a Human Spiderweb and the impact on them from having engaged in this experience. In particular, we were interested in whether participants experienced being awestruck. According to Braun et al. (2020), asking participants about their perspectives and collecting this data via a survey matches a qualitative methodology. This qualitative and descriptive research project was approved by the institution's Human Ethics Review Board.

Research Design

To gather information about the participants' awe experience, we provided them with a survey that was based on the Awe Experience Scale (Yaden et al., 2018) and included our own demographic questions. Data were categorized into themes using an inductive reduction and interrater reliability method (Thomas, 2006). This design method was used because of the relatively small number of participants but still allowed participants to provide insights relative to their own experiences.

Participants and Recruitment

To recruit participants for this study an anonymous survey link was posted in faculty newsletters at MRU, and posters were provided to those faculties that did not have newsletters. These newsletters are typically received by both staff and faculty, and those interested went to the link in the newsletter or the QR code on the poster to engage in the survey. Additionally, the link was posted by program advisors on student forums. Because this research included the concept of savouring—the notion that an experience can be recalled days, months, or years later—we decided to wait for a period of time after the event to recruit so that we could include the concept of savouring in the survey. Initially, 37 people participated in the survey, with an additional 3 joining after a request was received for a modification (see below), and the modification was made so that the survey could be sent to external participants.

Data Collection

Participants accessed a link to the survey, which contained some demographic questions as well as some subject-specific questions that allowed for open-ended responses. Surveys are a way to collect data from participants and are considered valid in particular types of research (Cobern & Adams, 2020). In this case, because we did not know who participated in the Human Spiderweb, a survey was the most appropriate method to gather the data we sought. The survey

was delivered a few weeks after the Human Spiderweb was enacted and closed 30 days after it commenced. A modification was sought to allow the gathering of data from community members who were not affiliated with the institution. After approval was received for that modification, we used a third party to provide the link to the survey to community members. After the closing date, responses were downloaded to a Word document and a thematic analysis commenced.

Analysis

Each researcher read and re-read the survey responses to determine themes on their own, after which each researcher interratered the themes of the other researchers. All the researchers met together to discuss and make note of aligned or misaligned areas. Then, using an inductive theme reduction method (Thomas, 2006), we found several themes related to the phenomenon under study. This reduction method allowed for responses to be condensed and summarized to enable us to draw links between the literature and participant experiences. Themes related to the survey responses were condensed to the following themes: collective effervescence, being awestruck, and a commitment to reconciliation at the institution and in the community.

Findings

As we completed the data analysis and the themes emerged, we saw that these themes represented elements of the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (2015). While the event was purposefully created as an act of reconciliation, we did not anticipate that participants would make statements in their response that were directly linked to the Calls to Action. The theme findings showed that when we honour and find ways to enact Indigenous Knowledges, everyone benefits.

The survey responses from participants revealed three main themes (as noted above) related to their experience at the “Ani to pisi” Human Spiderweb event: collective effervescence, being awestruck, and commitment to reconciliation within the institution and community. The sections that follow present each theme in detail, highlight what participants experienced and felt, and connect these reflections to existing research as well as Indigenous ways of knowing and teaching. This approach allows us to understand how participants’ embodied and emotional experiences relate to broader scholarly discussions and Indigenous pedagogical perspectives.

Theme One: Collective Effervescence

The concept of collective effervescence experienced during communal gatherings can be understood as experiences which increase “identification with all of humanity” (Rincón-Unigarro et al., 2025, p. 2) and a sense of unity. The enactment of “Ani to pisi” is an event that takes place on the land, something Elder Bear Chief said was necessary. John Acharibasam is a researcher whose land-based scholarship assists us in understanding our connection to the land and how we can live harmoniously and relationally with the land and each other. As Acharibasam et al. (2024) explain, “There is only one law for all creation. That is natural law, that is the creator’s

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law” (p. 6). Such teachings reflect the Indigenous worldview that all creation—human and nonhuman—is part of a sacred web of life guided by natural law. The “Ani to pisi” event, grounded in this worldview, thus became a powerful enactment of relationality.

The embodiment of “Ani to pisi,” the Human Spiderweb, saw approximately 500 participants standing together in large concentric circles, who then began a round dance, holding hands, which showed their interconnection. Participants experienced collective effervescence both visually and spiritually when the Elder’s presentation of the Ani to pisi creation story was told at the beginning of the enactment. Ceremonies such as this bring us closer together as humans and can extend our relationality to the land, water, animals, and all living beings.

Findings from the research on awestruck illustrated that participants experienced a profound emotional and spiritual connection during the Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb enactment. Many described feelings of unity, sacredness, and an overwhelming sense of belonging. One participant reflected that they felt like “*part of a whole bigger than [themselves].*” At the same time, another highlighted that the most memorable moment was the communal act of forming the Human Spiderweb through linked hands: “*It felt like I was interconnected with each of the hundreds of individuals there. I laughed along with them and cried with them. When we joined hands it felt like we were all one being.*” These sentiments mirror foundational Siksika teachings embedded in the “Ani to pisi” creation story, which emphasizes not only human interconnections but also reciprocal responsibility to the land, spirit world, ancestors, and future generations. Archibald et al. (2008) emphasized that genuine respect for Indigenous knowledge requires intentional space, in which individuals are invited to reflect, feel, and engage meaningfully with diverse ways of knowing.

Indigenous scholarship emphasizes that Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) culture is deeply embedded in lived, relational experience rather than abstract concepts. As Bastien and Chief (2004) note, “Niisitapi culture is not an abstraction but is rooted in the concrete relationships of tribal people to their world” (p. 29). As well as a powerful sense of unity, sacredness, and belonging among participants in the Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb event, for many it was an emotionally transformative experience. As one participant expressed it, “*Goosebumps and tears as the drumming and singing started.*” This comment confirmed that participation in the Human Spiderweb is an embodied experience.

Laurila and Willingham (2017) echoed the findings that highlighted how communal drumming fosters emotional healing, confidence, and social inclusion through shared rhythm and collective music-making. In addition to the drum circle, which contributed to building deeper relationships among participants, the significance of these connections was identified as a key influence on various aspects of personal growth. Many participants also expressed that the experience helped them find their voice, not only through song, but in the courage to seek change in broader academic and social spaces. For example, one participant said, “*I felt like together we*

are better off and together we can affect change. It was amazing to feel like as a group we are making change.”

Furthermore, the collective effervescence experienced by participants was expressed in the words “joy,” “pride,” “awe,” and “spiritual grounding.” The Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb functioned as a decolonial intervention within the academy. It disrupted conventional forms of learning and created a space where Indigenous ways of knowing could be centred, honoured, and felt. Such spaces foster what Black et al. (2018) described as culturally safe environments that support identity formation, emotional expression, and empowerment through the validation of cultural practices. Black et al.’s research found that participation in culturally strengthening programs allows Aboriginal youth to experience healing, share feelings safely, and reinforce a strong sense of self through connection to culture. Similarly, participants in the Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb event engaged in an embodied form of collective effervescence and learning through Siksika teaching and storytelling.

Theme Two: The Awestruck Experience

When we are awestruck, there are physiological signs such as goosebumps and tearfulness. These physiological signs are accompanied by other, related, emotional experiences. In terms of emotional and physiological experiences, participants said they started to produce tears as their eyes widened. Some of the emotional experiences were described as “*excitement, encouragement, peace, joy, calmness,*” as well as being “*humbled, overwhelmed, [and] grateful.*” Bodily sensations were described as “*heat, electric, [and] bubbles,*” and “*goosebumps, [my] heart felt like it was beating along with the drums.*” Others’ statements confirmed these feelings: “*tears,*” “*chills,*” “*goosebumps,*” and “*butterflies.*”

Since we sought information some time after the event rather than immediately after, we asked if participants savoured the experience, since this is a concept related to being awestruck. According to Lauzon and Green-Demers (2020), “savouring is the capacity to focus on pleasant experiences in order to intensify and prolong the experience of positive affect” (p. 1225). When we savour the feeling of being awestruck, deeper emotional and sensory experiences will be anchored in the body and therefore can be recalled in the future (Paquette, 2020). We may engage in an event that cognitively we do not take in as awe-inspiring; however, our body may have registered the experience. Chen and Mongrain (2021) suggested that “awe could also be cultivated by conjuring up images of past experiences of astonishment and deep amazement” (p. 775).

Most participants stated that they could place themselves back in the event and describe the same thoughts and feelings. For example, one participant’s statement sums up much of what was said: “*Reflecting on the event evokes a similar sense of humility and respect, almost as if my body remembers the experience of being present and open to something larger than myself. It’s a reminder of the power of collective moments and shared understanding.*” Researchers are aware

that when an awestruck experience is savoured, it can be recalled months or years later. Therefore, we can bring back those embodied experiences which can help in times of distress (Lauzon & Green-Demers, 2020).

When asked what the most memorable part of the event was, several people noted the sound of the drum, the round dance and moving together. This is exemplified particularly well in one response: “*following the beat of the drummers in unison.*” These responses resonate with reported experiences of synchronized and rhythmic movements coordinated among people in collective rituals found worldwide (Jackson et al., 2018). What is truly remarkable about these participant statements is that the comments provided in this section of the survey noted ritual activities associated with collective effervescence. Through coordinated effort and synchronized movements, individuals mirrored each other’s gestures, guided by the shared rhythm of the drum and music. This collective focus enabled approximately 500 participants to move together in unison. Doing so increases cohesion and prosocial behaviour (Jackson et al., 2018). Knowing that the participants savoured the experience shows it will stay with them and could lead to more community connections and connections to our shared humanity.

Theme Three: Commitment to Reconciliation Within Community and Institution

A genuine commitment to reconciliation within community and institutional contexts requires more than policy changes or surface-level acknowledgments; it demands a transformation of individual and collective consciousness. As Paquette (2020) noted, “Awe moves individuals away from self-centred ways of being toward connectedness to others and to the world around them” (p. 15).

Emotional experiences that disrupt self-centred perspectives and promote interconnectedness are crucial. Awe plays a critical role in this process by shifting individuals’ focus away from personal concerns and fostering a sense of belonging to something greater than the self. Awe encourages humility, openness, and a deeper appreciation for diverse ways of being, all of which are essential for reconciliation efforts that seek to honour the experiences and histories of marginalized communities.

Participants’ reflections following the Human Spiderweb enactment demonstrated how embodied experiences can strengthen a lived commitment to reconciliation. Many described the event not as symbolic but as an active, relational enactment of reconciliation. For several participants, the physical act of connecting hand-to-hand, strand-to-strand, created an emotional bridge between intellectual understandings of reconciliation and a felt, visceral experience of interconnectedness. The Human Spiderweb allowed participants to experience being an essential part of a collective effort. For many, this made reconciliation tangible rather than abstract.

Survey responses also revealed the strong motivations that led participants to engage with the Human Spiderweb. Key themes, such as desire for Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation, were central to why individuals participated. Participants expressed their commitment to these processes, and some stated their desire to actively support Indigenous

communities and contribute to the broader national reconciliation effort. Importantly, this level of participation was supported by the accessibility of the experience. The enactment provided an approachable entry point into reconciliation work, allowing participants to engage without needing prior knowledge or expertise. Hosting the activity within the university setting intentionally created a space where individuals could begin or deepen their engagement. One participant shared, *“I felt joyful for our connection in honour of the children and Indigenous People’s Day,”* while another emphasized that *“the acknowledgment of Indigenous traditions brought a sense of respect and groundedness.”* These sentiments reflect a profound, personal commitment to supporting reconciliation on both individual and collective levels.

Moreover, several responses highlighted personal motivation to such participation in the future. As one participant said, *“I am committed to learning about Indigenous stories and actively participating in decolonization and Indigenization efforts on campus.”* Such responses suggest that the enactment served as a meaningful opportunity for individuals to further engage with and act on their commitment to decolonization.

The collective participation of faculty, students, staff, and community members also modelled the shared responsibility required for meaningful reconciliation. When participants witnessed a diverse range of individuals coming together under the leadership of Elder Bear Chief and guided by Blackfoot teachings, this reinforced the need to understand that reconciliation must be a collective, sustained, and action-driven process. Several participants emphasized that participation across sectors demonstrated that reconciliation is not the work of a few individuals but a collective effort that requires ongoing relational engagement.

The enactment also served as a catalyst for future commitments. Some participants expressed a desire to engage more deeply with Indigenous knowledges, participate in future events, and advocate for institutional changes that better support Indigenous students and community members. Others reflected on how the emotional impact of the event inspired them to rethink their own educational, leadership, and community practices, and recognized that relationality must be centred rather than existing at the margins.

Additionally, awe fosters existential awareness and openness to uncertainty. These qualities are critical in reconciliation work, which often involves discomfort and ambiguity. Bonner and Friedman (2011) emphasized that awe *“stimulates the accommodation of new information into existing mental schemas,”* (p. 174), which opens individuals to transformative learning and relational shifts. Awe encourages humility, responsibility, and a willingness to rethink entrenched perspectives, and awe can function as a bridge between personal growth and systemic change.

In this way, the Human Spiderweb enactment functioned not only as an awe-inspiring event but also as a catalyst for participants to embody reconciliation as a living, ongoing practice. Awe, as an emotional catalyst, offered participants an opportunity to step outside of habitual ways of being, to feel deeply connected to a broader relational web, and to commit to reconciliation as a sustained, relational journey grounded in Indigenous values and collective action.

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) highlighted in Call to Action #62, it is imperative that post-secondary institutions incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems into teaching and learning. The Ani to pisi Human Spiderweb answers this call by offering not only a model of inclusion but a reimagining of what education can look like when grounded in relational accountability and Indigenous ethics. The theme of collective effervescence, as illuminated in both participant responses and Indigenous scholarship, affirms that transformation happens when people come together not merely to learn, but to feel, to remember, and to connect in sacred ways.

Discussion

The collective effervescence literature consistently identified a sense of belonging as a central participant experience. In this research we can see that the survey respondents expressed moments of community and belonging. The participants also expressed gratitude and appreciation. The notion of being in the presence of something larger was also noted by participants. These feelings of appreciation and the awareness of something greater speak to being awestruck during the event. Their comments showed that participants in the event, at least those who responded to the study, were awestruck through collective effervescence.

It is also important to note the number of participants who commented on their own commitment to truth and reconciliation. People wanted to put action to their commitment, and having this event allowed people to show that they take their responsibilities seriously. Any post-secondary institution can create such embodied opportunities for those on campus to be involved in truth and reconciliation activities, as this research clearly shows.

The felt experience of being awestruck is an embodied experience. Participants in this research also described the deep emotional sensations that accompany being awestruck. Terms such as “goosebumps,” “tearfulness,” and “heart pumping” are all related to the bodily responses to an awesome experience. In addition, participants’ comments that they felt hope for humanity, that somehow they mattered, and that barriers were broken down, say plenty about how much people were immersed in the experience.

Being awestruck can be used to boost one’s mental health (Paquette, 2020), and it is our hope that participants will use this savoured experience to counter negative thinking when it threatens to take over. As noted by Chen and Mongrain (2021), people need only to think back to the savoured experience and allow the emotional and physiological responses to surface once again. When one allows the embodied experience to surface again, it will remind them that they do belong and they do matter.

Limitations

The decision to engage in this research came out of a pilot project, and we engaged in it because we became inspired by people who described their experiences as being awe-inspiring. We wanted to gather data to inform future Ani to pisi events, particularly if we decided to include the enactment during the Journey to Indigenization, an annual two-week program to educate the campus community about decolonization and Indigenization. This study allowed us to further explore whether participants truly experienced collective effervescence, were awestruck, and savoured the experience. It is likely that those who completed the survey were individuals who were positively impacted by the event and that is why they felt motivated to complete the survey.

As noted in our results, only a few programs were represented in the survey relative to overall event participation. Participants in the Human Spiderweb were mostly from one particular faculty, where Roy shares the “Ani to pisi” creation story to support student learning and connection. As a result, survey respondents may have had a deeper understanding of the creation story, felt a stronger connection to the campus-wide event, and been more likely to complete the survey than participants from other programs.

It is also important to recognize that individuals may not want to fill out a survey about their experience. We were inspired to embark on this research project based on word-of-mouth reports of awe-inspiring experiences students and faculty members told us about, and on the results of a pilot study. We anticipated a much larger pool of participants. However, what strikes awe in one person may not in another person; the experience is deeply human and individual, and may not similarly prompt the desire to participate in a survey about that experience. Some people may want to keep this experience close to themselves, may not have experienced collective effervescence or awe, or may not have the words to describe what they experienced.

The survey was provided a few weeks after the event to capture whether savouring had taken place. However, at that point students may not have had time to complete it, since the academic term would have been in full swing. Similarly, many contract faculty who may have participated in the event are less likely to read the faculty newsletter, where the survey was advertised. These factors may have impacted the number of participants in this study. Regardless, the results are clear that the people who completed the survey did experience collective effervescence and were awestruck by the event.

Conclusion

Although this was a small study, the results indicated that participants reported collective effervescence and feeling awestruck through the enactment of the Ani to pisi creation story and Human Spiderweb. We have a deep tendency to want to synchronize with others around us. For instance, when babies see our facial expressions, they instinctively try to mimic them, and when

someone smiles, we often smile back. When learning something new, we tend to imitate actions and gestures (Keltner, 2023; Jackson et al., 2018). This same desire of participants to be “in sync” with one another happened during the enactment of the Human Spiderweb. This event, which encouraged group synchronicity, created profound social and emotional experiences for those involved.

The research also highlighted the appreciation participants had for this post-secondary institution offering an event that engaged individuals in a meaningful act of reconciliation while honouring Indigenous history and knowledge. Cote-Meek (2020) stated that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Report compels all post-secondary institutions to respond to the 94 Calls to Action, and respondents in this study expressed hope that this event would continue to be offered annually. The findings illustrate how that responsibility can be taken up in a concrete way. The event centred Indigenous knowledge through the sharing of the “Ani to pisi” creation story by a noted and experienced leader, Elder Bear Chief, who led the Human Spiderweb and brought participants together in a shared campus experience that invited learning and a meaningful sense of connection. These results point to the important role institutions can play in creating opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to engage in reconciliation in ways that move beyond policy and into lived experience. We hope that this article will inspire others to create similar events and show how similar tangible initiatives can be developed as ongoing commitments to truth and reconciliation.

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