I came to talk about land-based healing. We’ve been involved up in Whitehorse for probably the past seven years doing a land-based healing camp called Jackson Lake. But I’ve been involved in land-based healing my whole life. We’ve actually created a camp, an opportunity for people to come to it and to share and to heal, so I’ll talk a little bit about that, but I want to first just say that this is the first time I’ve ever come to Yellowknife, and I immediately felt comfortable here. People were so kind and so nice.

I’m grateful to be able to come here and to speak and to be allowed to speak on your land. I’m grateful and I’m conscious of something. I believe in magic; no, I don’t mean like the kind where the guy makes the elephant disappear off the stage, but I mean real magic – the magic that brought us all here together. I believe in that so much. I sat there last night and I saw people in the foyer of the hotel and people smiling and talking to each other. When I went to my room, I sat down [and] I thought, “Man, what created this?” Certainly, the organizers. It’s incredible; everything is incredible so far.

But what really surprised me was, what moved people to do this? In my life right now, I’m feeling like this is it; this is what’s going on. This is a time for us to become human again, to learn what it means to be who we are, and it’s an incredibly powerful thing. We’re blessed to somehow come here and to do this. And I don’t know if we’ll do it again; it doesn’t really matter. The thing is we’ve come here together. We’re family.

My grandmother at some point told me about power, and that everything was about power, she said. All things in creation are about power; not necessarily power over, but power with. In creation, it’s power with. I remember one time I was in residential school and I was home for the summer and the Anglican minister came to our house and she offered him cookies and tea, and he came in and they spoke. At some point this Anglican minister turned to her and said, “Annie, I notice you haven’t been coming to church lately,” and my grandmother said, “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it though... I’m wondering, is your god inside the church?” And the Anglican minister said, “Absolutely, he is inside that church,” and she said, “See that’s what I was thinking about, because you guys must be mean to keep him in there like that.” She said, “You should let him out sometime, you know. Mine is too big for that little building and I think now I’m not going to go to church no more; I think that the land will be my Bible now.” I was sitting in the back room, and I was like, “Right on Grandma.” My grandmother, she was born way out in the bush and she came into this world and she was forced to speak a different language; she was forced to change her way of life. She didn’t really have a choice. I thought about where she had come from, like she grew up in this world and came out to this new world, and I said to her, “Grandma, do you hate those people?” And she looked at me and she said, “My goodness, grandchild, no.” She said, “They don’t understand; do you think that they’d be like that if they understood?” And you know, I thought at the time: What a naïve old woman she is. But I get it now – that’s exactly what we’re dealing with. It’s not mean, it’s not nefarious – people don’t understand. We do. We have an understanding, we have a relationship.

What I want to talk about first is what we mean when we say “healing.” My community, we call it Jackson Lake healing camp. People come out to the camp and do different workshops and things there, and people will say when they come to this camp, “Man, it is so peaceful here. As soon as I came on the land it just made me relax, it was so wonderful.” And so I say, “What do you think, that we found a peaceful spot in the bush? Like we had a little peaceful divining rod and walked around until we found a spot and said, “Whoa, build a camp here quick!” Or did we do this; did we make this? Did we create this, the energy that you feel, because of how we are with the land? I know something and it’s because of my grandmother and the life that I lived: We are connected to the land.
The land knows us. We don’t know the land much anymore, but it knows us, and it never gave up on us.

So, I said to the people there who said it was so peaceful, “Is it possible that we created this energy? Is it possible that we made this?” We go out there and we smudge the land before the camps, we pray, I speak to the land and I tell it, “People are going to come, people are hurting, they’re suffering and struggling; could you please help them? Could you just help them out a little bit to remember who they are?” And I know the land can hear me. So, is it possible that we create this, the stuff that you feel right now – is it possible that we do this?

When the eagles are flying, they call it the sacred. When the eagle’s flying over and a tail feather falls out of his rear end, does the eagle go, “Oh man, there goes another sacred feather?” Or is it just the feather? Then the feather lands in the water and down into the river it goes and gets all roughed up and then one of us is walking along the shore is like, “Whoa, an eagle feather!” We grab it and we immediately start to smooth it out and take care of it, and then it becomes our feather; then it becomes our sacred feather. We can do that. We can make things sacred. Even when we did the feeding of the fire at the beginning here, we created the sacredness; we invited our ancestors to come here. We said, “Come on, help us, look at us, we’re trying to do something good here, can you come and join us?” and they did – obviously, you can feel it.

So, I said to the people that were there, “What if we decided right now, in this moment, that we would treat our communities like they were a sacred place?” What if we went back to our community and said, “This is a sacred place” and we treated it like that – would it become that? Would it become the sacred? What if we looked at the people and instead of saying, “Well boy, people are screwed up” or “They are having trouble or struggling,” what if we said, “We’re sacred beings” – that we, the people in our community, our children, are sacred beings? What if we said that? Would it change them? Would they become that? I think they would.

“Healing” is a word we use so much. We have so many workshops about healing where we talk about it so much, but I think that healing is the most natural thing in the world. Anything you do out on the land, if you go take a strip off a tree out there, it will immediately cover itself with sap and heal. It’s hardwired into it. It’s natural. Moose chew the willows off in the springtime. The willows don’t flop over and say, “Oh I’m no good now.” They seal that wound up and they keep growing. That’s healing.

It’s magical and it’s hard-wired. I’m a carver; when I cut my hands, I don’t have to sit there and go, “Heal, heal.” All I have to do is keep it clean; if I keep it clean there’s some kind of miracle that happens – it heals all by itself. It’s inside me. The Creator made it that way. So then why do we try so hard to heal? Why don’t we just let the healing, the natural, do its work? Instead of trying to heal, we need to probably look at what’s stopping us from healing.

If it’s true – and I’m pretty sure it is – that healing is the most natural thing of all, then why don’t we let it do what it does instead of trying to make it do what it does? Why don’t we allow it to heal? Instead of looking at how do we do it, let’s find out what’s stopping it – what’s in our way – and then remove that. It’s like a big log jam. Pull out a log or two and the stuff will flow through by itself and clear it out.

One of the things that our people have always been about is relationship. We lived our life in relationship – how we are connected to one another. When I was little, I was taught to call people by my relationship to them; I would say “Hello Uncle,” “Hello Aunty,” “Hello Grandma.” Somebody who was really old, you called them “Grandma” or “Grandpa.” Even if I didn’t have any relationship to you in blood, I would say, “Hello, my Grandma.” The most important thing of all in our world is our relationships, how are we tied to each other.

One year a long time ago, I watched my grandmother when we were picking berries on the other side of the lake. We came back to the boat and the wind was blowing and the waves were big and I watched my grandmother walk down to the water. She kneeled down and she put something into the water and then she spoke to the water and she said, “My relation, can you just calm down a little bit? I need to get across to my camp.” Then she spoke to the

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*Moose chew the willows off in the springtime. The willows don’t flop over and say, ‘Oh I’m no good now.’ They seal that wound up and they keep growing. That’s healing.*
wind and she said the same thing, “My relation, can you just calm down a little bit for us? Let me get across the lake.” And the lake calmed down. It didn’t get glass calm all of a sudden, but it calmed down. And my grandmother said, “Get in the boat, hurry up.” So, we jumped in and we went back across, and once we hit the other shore, the wind took off again. I thought, “Wow, my grandmother controls the weather – man that’s crazy! I can’t wait till I grow up and can blow some guy over!”

It hasn’t worked yet. But it’s about relationship. One time we were up in the bush and she said, “It’s going to rain.” It was a beautiful clear day. We said, “Grandma, there’s not a cloud in the sky. It’s not going to rain.” She said, “It will rain. Look at those willows; look how they turned their leaves upside down like that. When they do that they’re calling the rain. Watch and see.” Sure enough, in the afternoon, would you know it, these clouds come in and it rains. But I never thought that the willows control the rain; what I thought was: They have a relationship. All [the] willow’s got to do is that and the rain will come, because they’re connected to each other. My grandmother didn’t control the weather – she had a relationship with it. That’s the way of our people; that’s the way we are.

The other day I watched my little girls in a skating event, and I watched this little boy and his grandfather – he was probably about a year old. I watched him play; he could walk but he was still falling down. He’d run a few steps and fall over. I watched that little boy – he was just cute. And I watched his grandpa act all goofy, making all kinds of faces, and when I looked at the boy he was just smiling. And I thought, “Does he think? Are there thoughts going through his head?” Because when I think, I think in a language; I think in English because that’s what language is predominant for me. But I thought, “He doesn’t even have a language, so how could he be thinking? Does he have his own language, a baby language?” I know his communication is perfectly clear. When that little guy is happy and he smiles at you, you just light up; even if you’re not his family, if he smiles at you, you just feel so good. But if he’s in trouble and let’s out a cry, bam – there’s this reaction that comes in, like I gotta stop it, figure it out. Crisis mode. I thought, “This little guy doesn’t think – not the way I do. He feels. It’s different and it’s pure. Once we teach him this language that I’m speaking right now, it’s going to step on top of that. Once we teach him English he’s not going to be able to do the same thing anymore.”

I started thinking about how the language that we’ve been given to speak holds us down. I realized some time ago that I speak a separation language. I’m programmed to speak it. That’s why I can’t come next to creation, because creation has to be spoken to in a connection language. So, when I see an eagle flying

*Photo Credit: Pat Kane*
“Look at that raven sitting out there,” she said. “That raven, he’s got a spark of life, same one as you. He has a physical body same as yours; he’s got the same water inside his body, too, same as yours; he breathes the same air as you do; what’s your relationship with the raven?” And it was interesting, because I never thought about that. She pointed at the tree and said, “What about that tree? Because a physical body is called a spark of life come from the Earth. Trees are the same as you. What’s your relationship to the tree?”

And I realized what she was talking about was your original understanding. That’s why we had such a reverence for everything, is because we were related to what we were connected to in some huge way. Now we have meetings and we talk about how we treat it good, but it’s about relationship. It’s about how we are connected to it, how we are connected to each other, how we’re connected to the land. Land-based healing is about how we can get our relationship back. It’s about how we can remember who we are.

So, my grandmother said when I asked her, “Do you hate those people?” she said, “No, they don’t understand. Do you think they’d be like this if they understood?” I get that now. I totally get that. We’re here, we’re brought together here by people that want to learn, want to try and understand. We’re the ones that have to help them understand. This is the only way the world is going to make it right; this is the only way our children are going to be able to become who they are, is that we help the people and support the changes to the language differences, the language of separation.

*Editor’s note: This piece has been edited for length and clarity.

Phillip Gatensby is a Tlingit Peacemaker. For over 25 years, Phillip has worked with human beings using a value-based transformational approach to human development. This approach is facilitative in nature, drawing on life experiences, Tlingit values, counselling techniques, and the unique perspective of having emerged victorious both from residential school and the correctional system. It is based on the idea of creating healing opportunities that people may draw on their own resources to make healthy choices for themselves, their families and their communities. Phillip has applied this approach across North America and Europe, in diverse settings with people of all ages, from all walks of life. Street people, Christian groups, gangs, and Supreme Court judges have equally found great value in this vision-driven combination of universal truths and modern principles. The approach is profound in its inherent simplicity and powerful in its unflagging ability to transform the lives of those who choose to participate.