



Visual Art Competition 2021 – University of Calgary Undergraduate Medical Education

September 3, 2021

Ian MacNairn

403-689-57645

iasmacna@ucalgary.ca

Blessing a Flow Like River

“Everything changes & nothing stands still.”

-Heraclitus

This image comes from a recent experience I had in northern Alberta. I spent a few weeks in an elective that explored ceremony and medicine within Indigenous communities. I had been invited to a fasting camp held in the Northern Boreal forest by a Sun Dance *taioshpai* – community. I was asked to help care for those fasting in the forest. A central component of my task was to care for the sacred fire, burning for four days and four nights. I gathered, split, and stacked wood each day. And, fed the fire for the whole four days and night.

The community had been praying for rain for months. The summer’s record-breaking heat led to blazing fires that were ravaging forests and communities across the country. On this morning, we woke at sunrise to rolling thunder and rain. It was the first rain of the summer. It fell light at first, but crescendoed into a fierce storm that lasted all day. I stood by the fire, stoking it with additional logs. Yet, the rain fell harder. I sheltered the fire with a tarp with the help of one of the *kokums* –grandmothers. It fell harder still. The rain began to pool in the bottom of the fire’s pit. It rose as if a bath. The *kokum* and I watched and laughed, amazed, as the rain filled the pit. The flames were being assuredly extinguished by the welcomed rain. I dashed inside the only structure –a wooden barn containing the sweat lodge and wood-burning stove– and grabbed the pitchfork. I was able to pluck out an ember-filled log moments before the fire was fully drowned. I carried the embers inside into the stove and, thankfully, revived the flames. The *kokum* and I breathed easy and stepped back outside, into the rain in wonderment of the incredible, thunderous applause from the sky. It was surreal to watch fire extinguished by falling rain...from below.

We had been bathed, fully, from head to toe. The hard-falling rain made the ground dance and we were coated in the wet earth. I spent hours listening to stories of medicine and healing from the grandmother, beside the wood stove, before we were dry again. That morning after the fire’s bath, she shared a story that one of the land’s greatest medicines is the flow of seasons, the ever-changing flow of the land and all things. As Heraclitus penned some 2,500 years ago: *everything flows...*