

## Wisdom Sits in Places

By C. Elizabeth Best



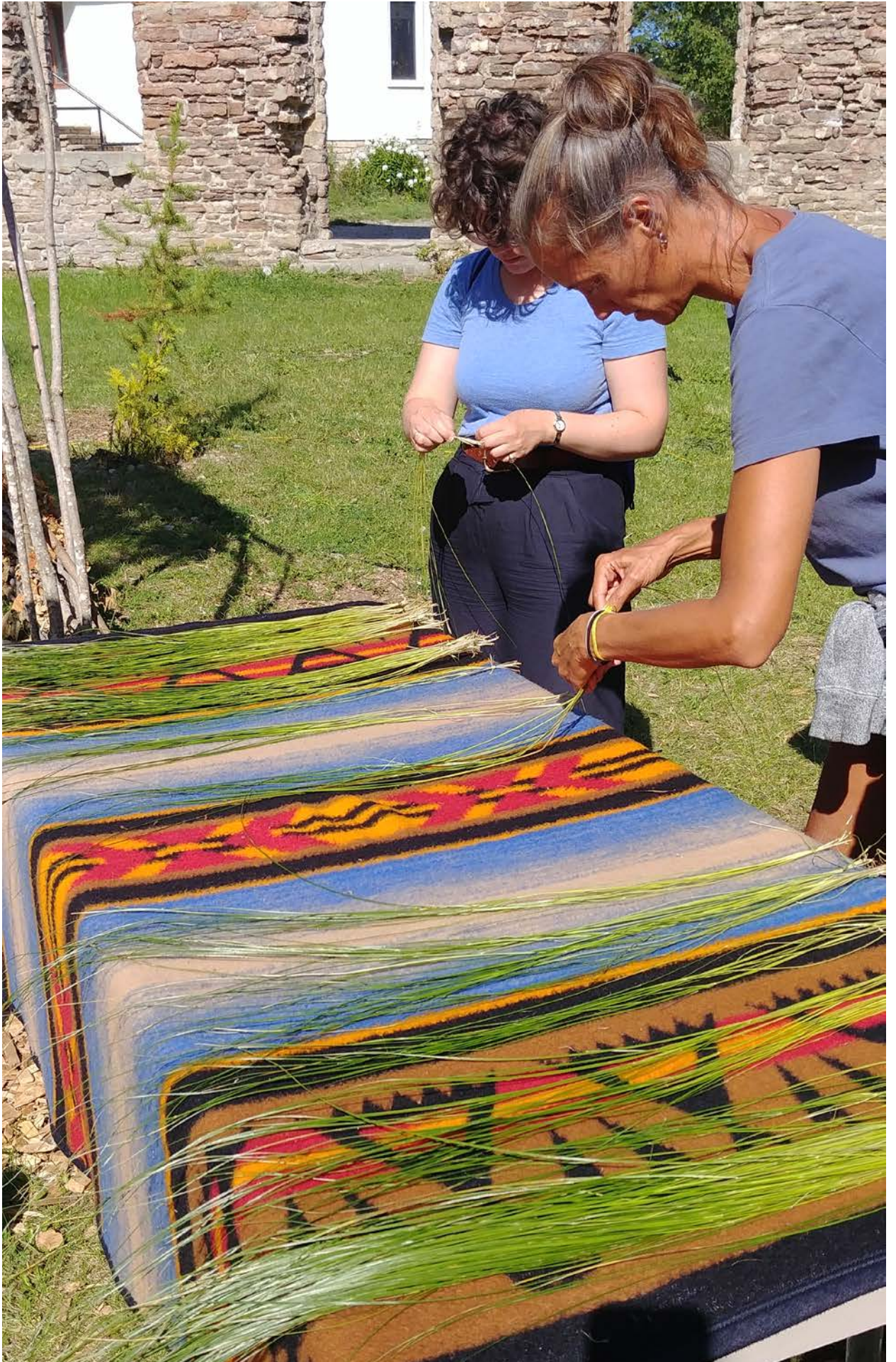
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Caption: Nico Williams, "Bandolier" from the exhibit "Spirit Transformations" Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, 2017.

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending the Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute (MISHI). The most exciting part of this program was that I was able to attend academic events at home. Previous to MISHI 2017, my academic life and my home world had been separate parts of my identity. As most people can attest, two worlds colliding is a strange feeling full of self-reflection.

Over the past five years, I have been grappling with identity. As a young Indigenous woman, I have been trying to find my place in the world and come to terms with the life experience I have accumulated. I was raised in foster care from shortly after my birth until I was adopted by a non-Indigenous family when I was seven. I grew up spending my summers on the island and I went off to University when I was 18. When people ask “where are you from” I have a hard time answering. Where am I from? For the past few years I have been saying I am from Manitoulin Island because my summers there are the most connected to place that I have ever felt. In addition, I recently married a Haweater and his family accepted me as one of their own. Family has been an elusive concept to me for most of my life. For example, until I was 12 years old, I expected my family to send me back. I wasn’t sure where ‘back’ was but my understanding of family was that it was constantly traumatic and unstable for everyone. I lived in fear that I would be sent back. It is safe to say that my adoption was not successful. However, my marriage has afforded me a real taste of unconditional support, something that I had not expected from falling in love with my partner.

I now consider myself from Manitoulin Island, even though my roots there are tenuous at best. I think this conundrum that I have been living aligns nicely with the theme of MISHI this year. Does wisdom sit in places? Yes. Yes wisdom sits in place. For me, Manitoulin Island is family. It is the stable rock of my life and the common link to the people I love. I have always lived between two worlds in one way or another. My Metis heritage set me up as a compromiser, not quite accepted but not rejected either. I can fit in without feeling like I belong. But when I am at home on Manitoulin the shining water and whispering trees tell me that I do not have to worry about other people. If only for one moment, I feel comfortable in my self because the whole island is saturated in wisdom that I can feel.



Caption: Sorting sweetgrass with Clara Fraser and Catherine MacDonald, Wikwemikong, 2017

For me, MISHI helped me tap into some of that wisdom. From treaties to the archeology site in Providence Bay to the OCF, my mind has been inundated with inspiration. I love Manitoulin Island and I love what it means to me. I am lucky to have been a participant in this event. MISHI came at a crucial time in my life. I am settling into a comfortable life in which I lean on loved ones for support. After 25 years of uncertainty, stability is the experience I have been craving. I really came to understand this feeling when I felt homesick for the first time after MISHI. Three days of being back in the city weighed heavily on me. I was feeling something in between sad and happy because, for the first time, I felt safe knowing I have a home to return to whenever I have the chance. My experience at MISHI was extremely personal because I came to know my home a little better. I came to trust that I have a family waiting for me at the end of the day. Thank you, Carolyn, Anong, Lewis, Michael and everyone else involved with the organization of this event. I will not soon forget the teachings of Manitoulin Island.



Caption: Alan Corbiere explaining the importance of wampum belts in Anishinaabe history, Manitowanging, 2017.