

# Ethnohistory Field School Report 2022

## “Waking to Dream” The Life Stories of Saylesh Wesley, Trans Stó:lō Elder-to-Be

As told by Saylesh Wesley to

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The Ethnohistory Field School is a collaboration of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Stó:lō Nation & Stó:lō Tribal Council, and the History Departments of the University of Victoria and University of the Fraser Valley.



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## Prologue

Life is full of quips that help us to normalize that which was (or is) deemed otherwise. In the 1998 classic, “Smoke Signals,” there is a scene where the DJ broadcasts, “It’s a good day to be indigenous,” so I’ll retort with, “It’s a good day to be trans.” Well, I’d like to believe that. But, hopefully, with such innovations as this piece, it may well be a possibility for me. To clarify, I’m only speaking for myself given the trans experience is very diverse with many spectrums. And humans could use a good dose of humility in order for true reconciliation. As it stands, reconciliation speaks to the relationship between Canada and its indigenous people, however, *reconciliation is needed everywhere and with everyone*. As a two-spirit transwoman whose underbelly is revealed in this biography, I know first-hand what it means to be uninvited, victimized and even hated. My hope is that any and all audiences who brave their unknown by learning a little bit about one trans life, can help all Two-Spirits to not only come home, but also ‘come in’ to fill the voids created by European settlers.

My hands are raised to Jamey, a beautiful new friend, sister and ally for her good interpretation of my story via our many visits. I would also like to embrace the spirits of my family, both past and present, for their part in my waking to dream. I coined this title to showcase the magic it will take for our world to become lovingly inclusive. May the world continue to move forward with grace, equity and inclusion as our rainbows of power and love can always use more colours!

Xwla ye total ó:met qas ye slilekwel (Towards understanding and harmony),

Saylesh

2022

## 1 – Birth Story/Stories

Saylesh Wesley was born under the bright, colourful dance of the Aurora Borealis on October 28th, 1972. Spending her childhood in the small coastal town of Terrace, B.C. — situated atop *laxyuubm Ts'msyen* (the land of the Tsimshian peoples) — Saylesh was raised by a Stó:lō mother from the *Sq'ewq'éyl* (Skowkale) First Nation and a Tsimshian father from Kitsumkalum. In honour of her family's matrilineal tradition, Saylesh is identified as Stó:lō and remains under the political jurisdiction of her grandmother, matriarch Rena Point-Bolton, from the *Semá:th* (Sumas) First Nation, who is half *Kw'ekw'iqw* (Kilgard), half *Nlaka'pamux* (Thompson). Saylesh's family descends from the great Chief *Xéyteleq*, a revered warrior and defender of their people from centuries ago.<sup>1</sup> Her grandmother's *Xwélmexw* (Indigenous) name, *Xweliqwiya*, comes from *Xéyteleq*'s mother, the head woman of the *Steqó:ye* (Wolf) family, who is the most distant known relative in Saylesh's family tree.<sup>2</sup>

While Saylesh's father recounts the evening of her birth as blessed and divine — “the northern lights danced across the clear night sky more brightly than he had ever witnessed” — Saylesh's grandmother narrates a different story.<sup>3</sup> After a grueling three-hour labour and emergency post-delivery surgery, Saylesh's mother nearly hemorrhaged to death due to a surgical mishap on the part of her doctor.<sup>4</sup> According to Stó:lō teachings, “a difficult birth foretells a difficult life.”<sup>5</sup> Looking at Saylesh's nearly fifty years, this foretelling has certainly held true. Among many difficulties, however, Saylesh's life has been no short of magnificent. Through immense fortitude and divine intervention, Saylesh has faced many of life's challenges with “courage” and “grace” — words used repeatedly by the Stó:lō Elders I spoke with to describe her.<sup>6</sup> Well-respected among not only Stó:lō but trans and Two-Spirit communities as well, Saylesh has marked a path of great influence and vision that will undoubtedly impact generations to come.

But to begin a biography for someone like Saylesh from the traditional starting point of a birth story requires one to confront a less than traditional question: Which birth story? As the first *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw slhá:li* (Twin-Spirit Woman) among the Stó:lō of the Lower Fraser Valley, Saylesh was not only born from her mother in 1972, but, as she explained to me, would also have to give birth to herself. This split between her official birthdate and initial “coming out” as a transgender woman in 1995 still offers too simple a narrative to track Saylesh's multiplex life. Such a linear and binary storyline — while common in biographies of trans people — overlooks the ongoingness of Saylesh's

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<sup>1</sup> Rena Point-Bolton and Richard Daly, *Xweliqwiya: The Life of a Stó:lō Matriarch* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2013), 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Saylesh Wesley, “Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts'iyóye smestiyexw slhá:li,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 340.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Denise Douglas, interview with author, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, recordings 1-6; Herb Joe, interview with author, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, recording 1.

becoming as a seer, healer, and Elder-to-Be today. As I would learn during our time together, such a narrative also fails to acknowledge a Stó:lō worldview of “cyclical and circular” time.<sup>7</sup>

While sharing about her 2012 weaving apprenticeship with her grandmother — a world-renowned Stó:lō basket weaver — Saylesh described her quick mastery of the art as if she was “remembering” she had done it before.<sup>8</sup> Instead of starting from the point of a novice, Saylesh felt like she was being guided: “the memory was just a millimeter inside my bones.”<sup>9</sup> Struck by an uncanny feeling, Saylesh wondered if she had been a weaver “in other lifetimes.”<sup>10</sup> This possibility, in accordance to Stó:lō belief in reincarnation, would be confirmed many years later. At a groundbreaking naming ceremony in 2016, Saylesh’s grandmother would bestow upon her the traditional female name *Poleqtanot*, giving birth to another era of Saylesh’s life. Within a Stó:lō



*Saylesh wearing a cedar bark shawl she made with her grandmother (2013) photo by Charlotte Point*

worldview, a name is like a *shxwelí* (soul), in that it carries with it an entire history, including the power of its previous holders. As Saylesh would learn, the ancestor whose name her grandmother passed down to her was not only a well-respected Stó:lō matriarch, but a skilled weaver as well. “Such a naming for a trans woman has not been done in recorded history,” Saylesh shared, “a new precedent and ‘tradition’ has now been established for those upcoming and unrealised trans folk.”<sup>11</sup>

As beautifully narrated by Saylesh in her 2014 publication, “Twin-Spirited Woman,” the education that took place during her weaving apprenticeship was two fold. In teaching her grandmother about Two-Spirit people, Saylesh likened her natural ability to that of the late *Lamana* (Two-Spirit) We:Wa, a famous late-nineteenth-century fiber artist, weaver, and potter from the *A:shivi* (Zuni) people in the Southwest.<sup>12</sup> Métis and Nishnaabe Two-Spirit scholar Kai Pyle refers to the kind of connection living Two-Spirit people such as Saylesh make with people from the past as a practice of *trans\*temporal kinship*: “the ability of transgender and Two-Spirit Indigenous people to establish kin

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<sup>7</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 21st, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>8</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 23rd, 2022, recording 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Saylesh Wesley, email correspondence with author, July 31st, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> As a cultural ambassador for the *A:shivi* people, We:Wa famously traveled to Washington, D.C. in 1886 to meet President Cleveland, to whom she was introduced as a Zuni Princess. During her trip, We:Wa also delivered weaving presentations at the Smithsonian Institute where a collection of her creations remain today. Among many other honours, We:Wa is credited for being the first Zuni craftsperson to sell ceramic and woven goods to non-Indigenous people, which led to Indigenous crafts becoming considered ‘fine art’ in the US. Learn more about We:Wa [from this resource](#), created in collaboration with *A:shivi* consultants and artists, which was brought to my attention by Kai Pyle.

relations [...] across time, with both ancestors and descendants.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Saylesh, as both *Poleqtanot* and as a living Two-Spirit person belonging to a long line of Two-Spirit people behind and ahead of her, is a woman with endless origins and countless birth stories. Tracing Saylesh’s life from her mortal birth to her complicated childhood and teen years, to her early-twenties transition in Vancouver, to the conjuring of the term *Sts’iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li* in 2012, and then her renaming as *Poleqtanot* four years later, this biography charts not just a single birth story, but the many birth stories that make up Saylesh’s life. The biography concludes with her story today, where Saylesh is amidst yet another grand transition as an Elder-to-be.

Akin to many other Indigenous peoples, the Stó:lō hold the number seven in sacred regard. First introduced by one of their *St’át’imc* relatives, Saylesh’s family follows the “seven laws of life” teaching: health, happiness, generations, generosity, humbleness, forgiveness, and understanding. Speaking about the impact of intergenerational trauma, Saylesh also shared with me that the number of generations it takes to heal is seven: “the next generation will pick it up where I left off, because as you understand, healing is lifelong and often many lives long — it is not something that we ever stop doing.”<sup>14</sup> Both of these teachings stress the non-linearity of time and the connectedness of all things: “it’s all interconnected,” Saylesh taught me.<sup>15</sup>

In honour of these teachings, this biography consists of seven sections to represent seven significant eras of Saylesh’s life, starting with this first birth story. As articulated above, none of these eras are exclusive from the rest; they intersect, inform, and cycle to and from one another. While this narrative structure will follow a seemingly linear path from birth to today, Saylesh’s life experiences and transformations cannot be understood — nor were they relayed to me — in isolation. As this introduction began with interspersed accounts from Saylesh’s life, so will the forthcoming sections pull from Saylesh’s many experiences to paint a fuller picture of her past, present, and future.

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<sup>13</sup> Kai Pyle, “Naming and Claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Cree Two-Spirit Language,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 575-76.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, May 21st, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2 – Growing Up: Childhood & Teen Years

As a polymorphic insect whose final form is forged through total metamorphosis, the butterfly is a popular symbol for trans and Two-Spirit people’s journeys to self-realisation. Or, in Saylesh’s words, our paths to “wholeness.” It came as no surprise, then, for the two of us to learn that we both had butterfly tattoos on our arms. Stretching magnificently atop a vine of blooming pink roses, a beautiful yellow butterfly rests just under the roll of Saylesh’s right shirt sleeve. With this tattoo, comes the story of a cherished childhood memory. Recalling a family road trip to Chilliwack in the mid-70s, Saylesh recounted:



*Saylesh holding a butterfly (2015) photo by Christopher Silver*

I came walking down the highway and I saw this great big bush with huge pink flowers. It was a wild rosebush. And of course, I wanted the flowers, because I saw them when we had pulled in, so I wanted to go get some of those flowers. And I got up to the bush and I saw this yellow flower, even though B.C. roses are pink. But this one big yellow flower was moving. I walked up closer and realised it was a huge butterfly. It was windy so the butterfly was hanging on for dear life and I put my arm up like this. I don’t know what I was thinking or why I did it, but it let go of the branch it was hanging on to and turned around and crawled up my arm. My Dad took a picture, and he was really, really happy. It made him happy. And it was one of those rare moments that he and I shared. So, I had that picture forever. I don’t know what ever happened to it. I’ve lost it. But in the meantime, I got a butterfly tattoo on my arm, with the wild roses, and that’s where I had it on my arm.<sup>16</sup>

Saylesh’s yellow butterfly memory is both symbolic of and exceptional to the larger narrative of her youth. As a child, Saylesh was sweet and gentle, often running off or escaping to dream worlds



*Saylesh (left) with little sister Paula (circa 1978) photo by Gerald Wesley*

where she could fulfill her wildest fantasies. She loved wearing flowers in her hair, decorating herself with sticky Christmas bows and ribbons, pretending to walk down the wedding aisle with doilies on her head, and donning her mother’s beautiful hand-crocheted shawl. The one part of the butterfly story that sticks out, however — and likely the reason Saylesh cherishes it so much today — was the happy and encouraging exchange with her father. Most of Saylesh’s childhood experiences of dressing up, putting on makeup, or getting lost in fantasy worlds were quickly met with punishment. “It was a nightmare for me to be a child,

<sup>16</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 21st, 2022, recording 4.

and I didn't know what I had done to deserve what I got," Saylesh shared, "I was just wrong in every way, and I couldn't do anything right."<sup>17</sup>

Like many young trans feminine children, Saylesh would lie awake at night praying she could wake up a girl. "I had no idea how to be male," Saylesh remembered, "nor did I have any desire to be."<sup>18</sup> Rather, she thought if she wished hard enough, some magical force would come fix her in the night, and everything would be fine once she woke up. Lacking such an easy solution, Saylesh's irrepressible femininity existed in constant tension with who the world around her wanted her to be: "I was taught very young how to be ashamed of it. I was punished for it. I got spankings. I was shamed, I was humiliated. I was taught how to basically hate myself as a child."<sup>19</sup> Reflecting on these experiences as an adult, Saylesh knows that her Elders, parents, aunts, and uncles did not intend to cause her harm: "They were uncomfortable with it, first of all, so they took it personally. But they didn't know how damaging that was."<sup>20</sup> As Saylesh wrote in 2014, her family's "instinctual transphobia" was not their doing: "This is the 'good work' of religious doctrine and the rest of the colonial project."<sup>21</sup> But while Saylesh was able to shake off physical punishment for her femininity, constant shaming would dig much deeper: "every time that happened, it's like a little bit of myself, my soul, fell out of me. And I guess something divine was with me because I'm still here."<sup>22</sup>



*Saylesh at age 5 (1977)*

Despite near total disapproval of her feminine whims, young Saylesh could always count on receiving love and adoration from one person: her grandmother. Throughout Saylesh's childhood, her grandmother lovingly indulged her desires, allowing her to wear dresses, playing "Here Comes the Bride" as she pranced around the house, hosting and attending tea parties, and even making dolls for Saylesh to play with.<sup>23</sup> As her grandmother's tolerance and acceptance dissipated with time, Saylesh honed the ability to escape into her imagination: "I created fantasy worlds for myself, so much so that I believed it."<sup>24</sup> Her most vivid memory of escapism comes from Kindergarten:

I remember I was out on the playground. It was a sunny day like today, it was fun, lots of kids were playing, we were having so much fun. I think I was playing King of the Castle or something and I was on top of these monkey bars. I don't know who these kids that I was

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<sup>17</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 21st, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, with edits from Saylesh.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley, 2014, 343, with edits from Saylesh.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, May 21st, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>23</sup> Wesley, 2014, 341.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



playing with were. I mean, in my mind, I guess I thought they were my schoolmates. And it was just so festive and so wonderful. But all of a sudden, I heard my name being bellowed, and it's like I got shaken so badly. I came to and realised I was alone and totally soaked because it was a torrential downpour. I had no shoes on, no coat, nothing. [My Kindergarten teacher] just let me have it. And I don't even know how I got there. I don't even know when I walked out of the class to play. In my head, I thought it was real, I thought it was lunchtime, and it was time to play. So, in my head, the bell had gone, and I was outside. So, whoever those children were — I don't know who they were. The weather, I don't know why it wasn't sunny. But my fantasy was just that strong that it became real.<sup>25</sup>

Once Saylesh reached pubescence and any tolerance for her continued femininity waned, her need to escape the troubles of the world only grew stronger. There was one object or “glimmer of happiness” that tethered Saylesh to the fantasy world in her head: her coveted Crystal Barbie.<sup>26</sup>



*Mattel's 1983 Crystal Barbie*

Donning an iridescent, blush gown with a long, shimmery stole and glitter heels, Crystal Barbie was *the* doll of 1983. After years of being punished for playing with ‘girls’ toys,’ pre-teen Saylesh had to be strategic. One day, she devised a plan: she would forge a letter to Santa Claus asking for the Barbie of her dreams but sign it with her younger sister Paula’s name. When Christmas morning came along and her “tomboy” sister unenthusiastically pushed Santa’s gift aside, Saylesh’s master plan was complete. “I had two things in my life as a teenager in puberty that were good,” Saylesh explained, “My Crystal Barbie and my cats.”<sup>27</sup> Tucked under a fort of blankets behind a closed bedroom door on the third floor of her family home, Saylesh spent hours on end playing with her cats Jeffy and Patches and her Crystal Barbie. Together, they got lost in endless fantasy worlds where Saylesh could escape the harshness of her reality and, even if for a moment, be who she knew she truly was.

For a trans child on the cusp of puberty, though, Crystal Barbie was much more than a toy to Saylesh. Instead, she was a window to a world that felt out of reach. “I used to go into my room, me and my cats, and just play. And I would dress her up and create little outfits for her and change her hair and anything I could do to satisfy myself because I didn’t get to do all of that.”<sup>28</sup> Among the many factors that defined Saylesh’s complicated youth — from her young parents’ troubled relationship to incessant bullying and abuse at school — Saylesh most intensely laments her inability to have grown up like the other girls her age. Instead, she felt like her teen years were “absent,” as if

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 21st, 2022, recording 3.

<sup>27</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 21st, 2022, recording 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

she was “exempt” from going through regular coming-of-age milestones.<sup>29</sup> Speaking to the paradoxical nature of trans childhood, Saylesh reflects: “You grow up faster, but at the same time, you’re also stunted.”<sup>30</sup> Instead of being able to explore and express who she was through the traditional means of dating, having her first kiss, going to Prom, etc. like her cisgender, heterosexual friends and cousins, Saylesh had to resort to her imagination:

I was exempt from it all. And those things made me feel like I mattered even less [...] And it’s like I got left behind. I always had to stay home watching everybody else get to live and go through their milestones and lose their virginity and all that stuff. None of that was for me. It was just a very barren, lonely time. And all I had were my thoughts.<sup>31</sup>



*Saylesh as a teen (circa 1990) photo by Charlotte Point*

To make matters worse, Saylesh would also go through what she remembers as a “conflicted” puberty.<sup>32</sup> At her small-town middle school, Saylesh was growing small breasts and hips while her boy classmates’ voices began to crack: “I wasn’t supposed to be pretty and I wasn’t supposed to look like a girl, but everybody always thought that I was one until I was 15/16.”<sup>33</sup> While these changes fulfilled Saylesh’s yearning to be the girl she knew she was inside, she remembers them only as a “betrayal to my safety.”<sup>34</sup> Such an unconventional trajectory through puberty poised Saylesh for unrelenting bullying and sexual abuse, especially from boys her age. While her fantasy worlds could save her as a child, and her cats and dolls could provide momentary escape, the older Saylesh got, the more she felt alone, hopeless, and “absolutely betrayed in every way.”<sup>35</sup> Eventually developing insomnia in response to the stress, Saylesh remembers nearing the end of puberty and praying every night that a supernatural force would transform her — not into the girl she dreamt of being as a child, but into the “normal boy” everyone expected her to be.<sup>36</sup>

While most of Saylesh’s teachers and family members lacked the knowledge and sensitivity to support her as a trans child in the late 70s, her education and career as an adult has led her to fulfill that role for countless trans and Two-Spirit youth today. According to one of Saylesh’s best friends, Dianna Kay — who she met at age 12 or 13 — the students at *Lalme’ Iwesawtexw* (Seabird Island Community School) where Dianna teaches refer to Saylesh as “Auntie Saylesh.” “There have been

<sup>29</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>30</sup> Wesley, May 21st, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>31</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>32</sup> Wesley, May 21st, 2022, recording 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Saylesh Wesley, correspondence with author, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, 2012, 341.

so many others who have transitioned, especially children and young people,” Saylesh shared, “and they will always, always credit me. Always. They’ll always thank me for being who I am and thank me for braving the way.”<sup>37</sup>

Through working with what she calls the “Rainbow Crew” of queer and questioning students at *Lalme’ Iwesantexw*, Dianna’s applied what she’s learned from witnessing Saylesh’s journey to protect today’s kids fiercely. “It’s sad that we lost the place of our transgender and our Two-Spirit people,” Dianna shared, “It’s not really lost, I think it’s just hidden. And we have to make them safe. Saylesh has done so much work throughout the valley, throughout the world with her journey.”<sup>38</sup> Today, Saylesh cherishes moments in the company of young trans kids who, upon learning she is like them, will climb into her lap and not wish to leave:

When they find that in me, there’s this connection, there’s this understanding, there’s this beauty, an exchange of beauty that happens. And it’s symbiotic, it’s mutual. It’s cathartic for me, and my being who I am gives them hope and gives them reason to feel that they’re okay. And that they’re perfect just as they are. They are not a mistake like I was.<sup>39</sup>



*Saylesh (left) and Dianna (right) at the Lalme’ Iwesantexw opening (2009)*

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<sup>37</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 19th, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>38</sup> Dianna Kay, interview with author, May 20th, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, May 21st, 2022, recording 2.

### 3 – Becoming Saylesh: Early Transition

If Saylesh’s teen years felt “absent” or “exempt,” then her transition into young adulthood materialised in a different universe altogether.<sup>40</sup> After years of struggling to fit in as a child, opportunities to escape the torments of adolescence finally appeared as she grew older, especially among her Stó:lō community. In Saylesh’s late teens, she and her mom moved onto their family’s reserve in Chilliwack. Surrounded by her traditional culture more than ever before — and as a member of a prominent Stó:lō family, the Points — Saylesh would be provided many outlets to express herself, her favorite being ceremonial dance. This new chapter for Saylesh began at age 18 when she was initiated into a sacred Coast Salish society and, almost overnight, became a sensation: “The entire valley — more than the valley, all of the Coast Salish Nation, right into the United States, Vancouver, etc. — really, really loved my song and dance.”<sup>41</sup> Through artful mastery, Saylesh forged her way into the circle of her community. Consequently, she would become shielded from the bullying and abuse that marked her earlier years. “For once in my life I felt a sense of respect,” Saylesh explained, “I went full force into it [and] that gave me respect from people I never thought I had respect from.”<sup>42</sup>



*Saylesh as a teen (circa 1990)*

While Saylesh was beginning to feel home among her Stó:lō community, her place as a closeted trans person in a binary world continued to cause internal turmoil. Navigating certain gendered protocols in the Longhouse became a main point of this tension. In one particular ceremony, for example, “the women sing, and the men dance to the women singing.”<sup>43</sup> Despite her growing popularity — and even after a lifetime of social rejection — Saylesh’s inner, irrepressible femininity would hover over her like a dark rain cloud. “I remember all that honour and that adoration. It made me feel like I was a fraud because I wasn’t male. And so I carried that as long as I could.”<sup>44</sup> Despite being uncertain about the future that awaited her, 18-year-old Saylesh knew she was “at a point where I was going to transform.”<sup>45</sup> Neither did she know the nature of the transformation ahead, nor how long, “life-threateningly dangerous,” and eventually rewarding it would become.<sup>46</sup> “Like a phoenix, I was getting ready to rise from the ashes.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>41</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>42</sup> Jean C. Young, “Alternative Genders in the Coast Salish World: Paradox and Pattern,” *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations, 1919-2007*, University of British Columbia (1999), 50, with edits from Saylesh.

<sup>43</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>45</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>46</sup> Wesley, correspondence with author, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Wesley, correspondence with author, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Key to Saylesh's becoming into the woman she is today was her move from Chilliwack to the city of Vancouver in 1994. Accepted into the Indigenous Teacher Education Program at the University of British Columbia, 22-year-old Saylesh had finally secured an out. After years of feeling stunted, Saylesh looked towards the city not as the start of an education, but rather the beginning of a new life; a life where she could finally be herself. "I remember when I transitioned, when I went to UBC and started to sort of pick up where I should have picked up when I was 14," Saylesh explained, "I picked up those ways of wanting to be young and wanting to sow my wild oats, and to be free to be who I am."<sup>48</sup> Saylesh's teen years were forcibly put on pause while she was living under her family's roof in rural British Columbia. In Vancouver in the 90s, though, it seemed she would have nothing to lose.

During her first year of university, Saylesh remembers the friends she made at the UBC First Nations House of Learning as her rock: "it's like we were a home away from home with one another."<sup>49</sup> With a growing community, and finally beyond her family's constraints, it didn't take long for Saylesh to endeavor in her first "spiritual moments" of coming out.<sup>50</sup> After sharing her new name, Saylesh, with a safe group of friends, she held a "personal ceremony" where she invited her



*Saylesh at age 23 (1995) photo by Dan Brassard*

male friends to come to her apartment in the West End and empty her wardrobe.<sup>51</sup> "I gave away everything and started everything over," Saylesh described, "So I gave birth to myself."<sup>52</sup> Saylesh's childhood friend Dianna remembers having to do a double take at Saylesh when she saw her across campus in full makeup for the first time. After some processing and reflection, Dianna finally went over to break the ice: "Honey, don't do this," she declared, pointing at Saylesh's jaw, "If you're going to wear makeup, you need to at least learn how to blend." Saylesh and Dianna laughed, and, in Dianna, Saylesh would have a confidante for life. While Saylesh's guy friends served as her "guards" in these early transition years, Dianna fulfilled the role of "big sister," despite being younger.<sup>53</sup> They both remember getting into "a lot of shenanigans together."<sup>54</sup>

Like many trans women, Saylesh spent the first two years of her transition exploring what she now likens to being "non-binary." "It was my gentle way of transitioning," Saylesh described, "instead of going from one extreme to the other." The feeling of being "in-between" led Saylesh to quickly find home in the term Two-Spirit, a pan-Indigenous marker for people who possess both masculine and

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>54</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

feminine spirits that had only been coined a few years prior. Instead of having to embrace loaded labels like “gay” or “transsexual,” Saylesh felt that Two-Spirit was more respectful, plus “there was no stigma attached to the term.”<sup>55</sup> While there were some quiet rumors about Two-Spirit topics among her community, Saylesh wouldn’t learn about its history in depth until she enrolled in a class taught by anthropologist Bruce Miller. While she found the term beautiful and fitting in her early twenties, Saylesh’s eventual transition into womanhood would lead her to grow apart from identifying with having a male spirit at all:

I guess if I were to do it all over again, with all my knowledge and awareness that I have now, I wouldn’t [identify as Two-Spirit]. It doesn’t seem to fit because I don’t feel any maleness. Not that I feel like maleness is wrong. I just don’t feel it. I guess I would more readily say I am rather without gender, and so it’s a spiritual thing. But ultimately, I default to female and it’s just natural. It feels natural.<sup>56</sup>



*Saylesh at age 25 (1997)*

One of the first family members to learn about Saylesh’s transition was her “favorite auntie” Sailor.<sup>57</sup> As a tall, gay butch, Sailor was the trans masculine counterpoint to Saylesh’s trans femininity. Her aunt Sailor was in prison at the time Saylesh changed her name, so the two exchanged letters to share and respond to the news. “Saylesh?” Sailor penned, “Oh, imagine that. That’s like my name! Sailor and Saylesh, two fags walking down Davie,” referring to Vancouver’s gay district. Struck by her auntie referring to herself as a “fag” as opposed to a “dyke,” Saylesh remembers wondering at the time about her auntie’s own suppressed trans feelings. Stargazing together in the back of a truck in Chilliwack a few years later, Sailor remarked to her with amazement, “You’re okay.” As the first out queer person in their family, Sailor was terrified for Saylesh all throughout her transition. But after witnessing her emerge on the other end as a strong, confident woman, Sailor mustered up the courage to share something she had kept inside.

“I’m not a dyke,” Sailor confessed.

“Okay...” Saylesh started, “So what are you saying?”

“Well, you’ve inspired me,” Sailor responded, “I’m trans, too.”

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<sup>55</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.



*Sailor (1986)*

Despite coming out as gay many years before Saylesh and being around seven years her senior, Sailor had not taken the step to transition. Reflecting on Sailor’s passing shortly after their exchange under the stars, Saylesh explained, “she never found her ability to brave the world as she was. It was something that she felt she had to keep hidden. It was something that she never felt safe to do because it just wasn’t the right time [...] she gives me inspiration and reason to do it in her honour, because she never got to. So when I can’t show up for myself, I think about her.”<sup>58</sup>

With a long and arduous journey ahead, Saylesh had embarked on something no one from her community had before. In a conversation about Two-Spirit lineage, however, Saylesh acknowledged and honoured Sailor as belonging to the first generation of trans Stó:lō people, with Saylesh as the second: “She was the first generation, and she went through that first goal: the hell of the first generation. And so she never found peace.”<sup>59</sup> As the next in line, Saylesh attributes her opportunities and success to the path Sailor began to carve out: “Anytime that I need to remember that I have purpose and that I have reason to get up — if I can’t be enough — then I look to her and do it for her [...] she is one of the reasons that I live bravely, or why I persevered, in her name, and in her honour.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Wesley, May 21st, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 2; Wesley, May 21st, 2022, recording 2.

#### 4 – Diana Ross & Mariah Carey

While Saylesh’s first “spiritual moments” of coming out would take place among university friends and select family members, she would soon embark on the bulk of her transition somewhere far beyond the constraints of her culture, school, and family: Vancouver nightlife. When the sun went down over the Salish Sea, a heightened version of Saylesh hit the streets. Dipping her toes in drag, ball culture, modeling, and *finally* dating, Saylesh was on the precipice of giving birth to a new form of herself. Except, this time, she was not alone. Eleven years older, and just ahead in her transition, Saylesh’s soon-to-be best friend Dominique would pull Saylesh into a whole new world, teaching her “how to move underground.”<sup>61</sup>



*Dominique (left) & Saylesh (right) on a night out (1997)*

Dominique was a gorgeous, poised woman with piercing brown eyes and a glowing aura of mystique and intrigue. “She looked just like Diana Ross or Janet Jackson,” Saylesh remembers, “She was stunning, so I idolised her.”<sup>62</sup> From the second they crossed paths, Saylesh and Dominique were inseparable, going out on the town together five nights a week. Like clockwork, Saylesh would get a call from Dominique around 9 or 9:30 in the evening declaring either, “Girl, dress up,” or, “I feel like dancing.” Each call came with its own dress code and expectations; the dynamic duo strutting like supermodels with feather boas and four-inch stilettos or wearing more reasonable — but still fabulous — outfits to dance in until the sun came up: “She was Diana Ross, and I became Mariah Carey.”<sup>63</sup>

Like most trans women in the 90s, Saylesh and Dominique’s foray into womanhood was paved through the drag and club scene. Much like the fantasy worlds Saylesh would escape to as a child, drag balls, competitions, and categories where she was able to explore hyper-feminine makeup, dress, and comportment served as the doorway into another existence. Instead of dolling up her Crystal Barbie, the canvas was finally herself, and she was closer than ever to turning possibility into reality. “The movie *Burlesque* was how we lived,” Saylesh explained, “it was just all glitz and glamor.”<sup>64</sup> Together, the two queens would enter drag contests for cash prizes, guaranteed to place in almost all of them. On nights out, they would hit up the *Odyssey* — *the* gay club of 90s Vancouver — attending themed nights like Shower Power on Thursdays where naked men would dance around in falling water. Still relatively early in her transition, though, Saylesh remembers

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<sup>61</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>62</sup> Wesley, May 19th, recording 1.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 19th, 2022, recording 3.



Dominique remarking one Friday night, “Girl, when are you going to dress up?” While Saylesh had been dressing up at night, she had not yet committed to living her full, authentic self during the day. In response to Dominique’s call, Saylesh recalls, “that Sunday night I dressed up and just never got undressed.”<sup>65</sup>

The 90s was the decade of Vogue, the “Supermodel,” and RuPaul, who Saylesh remembers being the MAC Cosmetics icon at the time. “It was all about the androgyny then,” she explained.<sup>66</sup> One day, while hanging out at the Lancôme counter at the Bay where Dominique worked, the pair were approached by a modeling scout from Thierry Mugler, an haute couture French fashion house. Interested in the girls’ look, the scout requested to stage a photoshoot and faux runway for them. “I guess they saw this fabulousness between us,” Saylesh reflects, “and we were so happy. I remember we got dressed right up like red carpet or Dianna Ross — you know how Diana Ross goes above and beyond: *more is more*.”<sup>67</sup>



*Saylesh striking a pose at age 28 (1998) photo by Aggie Lee*

It was a warm, summer’s day in downtown Vancouver, which meant the sun was still shining when their photoshoot wrapped up around 8pm. All dressed up with nowhere to go, Dominique decided (as she usually did) that they would go to “Earl’s on Top,” a posh second-floor restaurant down Robson, almost halfway to Denman. Strutting down the streets in full glam, the two supermodels *owned* downtown. “Oh, cars were honking, men were walking into signs, like for real, and people were just like taking pictures,” Saylesh recalls, “It was just such a time.”<sup>68</sup> When they got to the restaurant, the clientele seemed to stop all at once to witness their grand entrance. “We’re here to eat,” Dominique demanded, ignoring that they didn’t have a reservation. “You two are too fabulous to be sitting with the common public,” the flamboyant waiter began, escorting them to a hidden VIP room in the back, “plus, you’re causing a bit of a scene. You are looking hot and fierce and we’re gonna treat you accordingly.”<sup>69</sup>

Among trans and drag communities, Saylesh and Dominique were in a total league of their own. But while there were definite moments of high praise and fabulousity, the day-to-day reality of living as a trans woman of colour in the 90s inevitably punctuated the good times with painful times. “The

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<sup>65</sup> Wesley, May 19th, recording 1.

<sup>66</sup> Wesley, May 19th, recording 3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

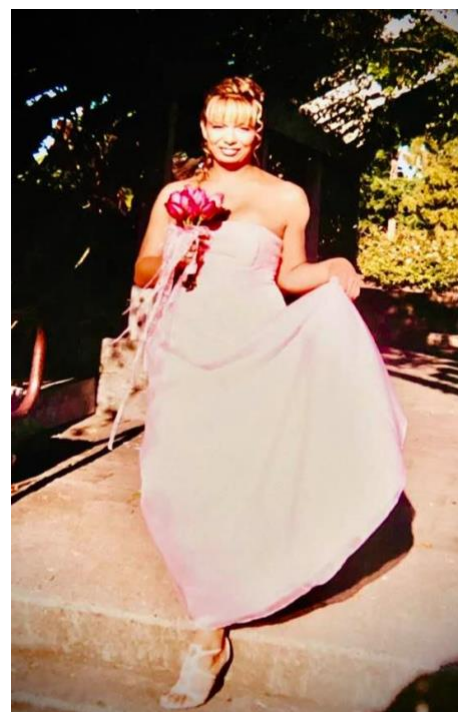
world did not concede to us whatsoever,” Saylesh described, “the whole trans thing wasn’t really a thing then.”<sup>70</sup> However, the exclusion Saylesh spoke most about was not from the general public. Rather, this vitriol came primarily from other trans women and drag queens. “The drag queens were guys, and so they were of two minds: they looked down on us because we were trans, and there’s a lot of misogyny in the gay community, but they were also jealous because we could look like cis women.”<sup>71</sup> As two beautiful, young trans women who could “pass,” Saylesh and Dominique were granted some freedom to move out in the world, but then animosity and jealousy among their community. “We would get kind of pushed in the corner and marginalised, but we didn’t care.”<sup>72</sup>

Beyond her glamorous nightlife, Saylesh still had to keep up with her B.A. in Education at UBC, something she remembers struggling to balance. It was between years two and four of university when Saylesh remembers the stress of her coming out coinciding with unresolved childhood trauma, resulting in anorexia, severe insomnia, and suicidality:

that was I think the hardest time of my life. I mean, I went through hell as a child, but at least when you’re a child, you’ve got adults who will help you, but when you’re alone and a young adult, there’s no one. And when life brings you to your knees like that, you’re the only one that can get yourself up and carry on.<sup>73</sup>

Behind her demure poise and intimidating gaze, Dominique was also predisposed to periods of deep depression, sometimes to the point where she would stop answering Saylesh’s calls. Both living in Vancouver’s West End, Saylesh and Dominique ensured they were always walking distance from the clubs and one another, making it easy for Saylesh to check in when her friend went unresponsive. “I was so persistent,” she remembers, “I would just go right to her place and like bang on her door until she answered.”<sup>74</sup> As her closest friend and sister, Saylesh was willing to do anything she could to foster Dominique’s wellness. Over the years, this took the form of getting her apartments, making her go to the doctor or dentist, and even cooking her healthy meals or offering her protein shakes. “What the hell is this?” Dominique would shrug, “Never mind, just drink it, it’s good for you,” Saylesh would retort.<sup>75</sup>

In 2006, Saylesh would be the one and only maid-of-honour at Dominique’s small wedding. Despite their inseparability for



*Saylesh at Dominique’s wedding (2006) photo by Reynold Collins*

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<sup>70</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 19th, 2022, recording 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 3.

<sup>73</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>74</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

nearly a decade, Dominique would soon after disappear from Saylesh's life, no longer returning her calls and suddenly moving away without warning. "To this day I will still call her my best friend," Saylesh reflects, "I miss her. I really miss her [...] I just hope and yearn that we'll come together again someday."<sup>76</sup> Entering her late-20s, Saylesh would also soon leave the nightlife behind for a professional career in education, first as a Teacher On-Call for the Vancouver School District, then as an Aboriginal Resource Teacher in elementary schools. Aligning with Dominique, Saylesh would also meet her husband and begin to build a life with him, eventually moving back to Chilliwack on her family's reserve in 2008. "All those years in the city, from '94 to '08, I never, ever imagined leaving," Saylesh explained, "And I barely even came here [to Chilliwack] to visit because I wasn't anyone when I came here."<sup>77</sup> While Saylesh forged her path to authenticity and wholeness as a young, fearless trans woman on the streets of Vancouver, the daunting challenge of translating that confidence and authenticity into her traditional, Stó:lō life was still ahead of her. Without Dominique by her side, she would need to muster up the courage and push forward on her own.

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<sup>76</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 3; Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 4.

<sup>77</sup> Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 23rd, 2022, recording 2.

5 – *Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li* (Twin-Spirit Woman)

*“Your transition isn’t just yours; it has to be everybody else’s who’s in your life, too. They have to transition with and for you. It’s not easy. Not easy for us. And I can’t imagine what it was like for them.”*<sup>78</sup>

While Saylesh’s early transition alongside Dominique in Vancouver was done with great conviction, the transferal of that confidence on her trips home and then eventual move back to Chilliwack was not so simple. For the 10-15 years after she first came out, a question mark hovered over who Saylesh was and what her role would be, especially in relation to her cultural community. This period was defined by “absolute awkwardness,” she explained, “because they couldn’t situate me.”<sup>79</sup> Having held a beautiful ceremonial song and dance ever since she was 18, Saylesh intuitively knows how others grew animosity towards her when she transitioned, as if she had harmed or “threw away” the boy they loved.<sup>80</sup> Over time, Saylesh’s grandmother would confirm this fear. As a Stó:lō matriarch with the power of assigning titles, Saylesh’s grandmother was silently considering Saylesh as backup for hereditary chief, a role held solely by men. “But you went and threw your gender away,” said her grandmother plainly many years later, “so there went that plan.”<sup>81</sup>

While Saylesh once experienced feelings of fraud for performing as male in the Winter Dance, reverting to that old version of herself when she would return home from Vancouver made her feel like a fraud to the woman she had become. “I rarely came home, but when I did, I would try my best to be in stealth mode, which I hated. And especially in the Longhouse, I felt so out of place.”<sup>82</sup> Despite a few sporadic visits, the period of her early transition and young adulthood was the most divorced Saylesh would be from her culture. Trying to carve out a new life in Vancouver, Saylesh remembers feeling ashamed of her indigeneity: “people would always think I was Filipina, and I would let them, because I didn’t like people knowing I was Indigenous.”<sup>83</sup>

As the first out trans woman among the Stó:lō of the Lower Fraser Valley, Saylesh would have to brave a series of “firsts” in order to carve a path for herself in traditional life. Nowhere was this more challenging than when it came to navigating ceremony and protocol in the Longhouse. After years of coming home in “stealth mode,” Saylesh remembers striking up a conversation with her uncle, Steven Point, that signaled the start of



*Saylesh with her uncle at her B.Ed Graduation (1999)*

<sup>78</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 2, with edits from Saylesh.

<sup>79</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 4.

much-needed change. On their way to Cheam one night for a gathering, Saylesh confided, “I don’t feel gay. I’m a woman. And I want to start wearing skirts.”<sup>84</sup> As the eldest in the Longhouse, Saylesh’s uncle was and still is the leader who could adapt traditionally binary rules of dress. To her relief, he affirmed, “I’ve been waiting for you to do that.”<sup>85</sup>

Despite now being allowed to dress as the woman she was, Saylesh’s formal place and role in the Longhouse remained uncertain. This was until a remarkable moment facilitated by her mother in 2002 changed the course of everything. Still living in Vancouver at the time, Saylesh had come home to participate in a sacred mask ceremony for a wedding — a traditional right and responsibility of her esteemed family. The particular ceremony required for this kind of occasion requires specific gender roles: “it belongs to the women, and the men are the arms and the legs to make it happen.”<sup>86</sup> Having now been open about who she was, yet still expected to fulfill male ceremonial roles, Saylesh felt like she had once again lost her “position in the circle.”<sup>87</sup>

For the first three days, I remember sitting idle on the bleachers of the Longhouse as if I was nobody, just there to witness. And everybody was sort of okay with that because they didn’t know how to situate me. They didn’t know how to see me. And I don’t know that they were meaning to do that because what’s happening is that they are basically participating with me to invisibilise me. And that’s dangerous, because if you invisibilise somebody for so long for your own peace of mind because you don’t have the courage to treat them the way you should, you can delete them. That person will believe you and delete themselves. And that was the critical place that I was at.<sup>88</sup>

On the fourth and final day of rehearsal, Saylesh took her usual spot way up at the top of the bleachers, planning to watch the ceremony go on without her. In accord with tradition, her female relatives were lined up to sing for the masks and call for their children to come and help. When Saylesh’s female relatives began to sing and her male cousins started to descend upon the floor, her mother broke protocol by stepping out of her place in line, putting her hand up, and signaling “Stop.” Everyone in the Longhouse froze in response to this matriarch’s action. Saylesh’s mom then faced towards Saylesh and called her down. Fidgeting in place for a moment, confused, Saylesh descended the bleachers. Once she reached the line, her mother ceremoniously removed her blanket and hat and put them upon Saylesh. She then placed Saylesh in her spot in line. Looking from her mother at the front of the line all the way down to her sisters at the back, Charlotte Point let her family know: “If any of you have an issue with this, you’re gonna deal with me.”<sup>89</sup> Saylesh reflected on this ground-breaking event: “For her to do that was one of the most powerful moments of my

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<sup>84</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 2.

life. In a sense that was the first time that I actually felt like a person. A whole person. It was beautiful.”<sup>90</sup>

While Saylesh’s transition, in a way, neared completion, this moment would serve as “minute one” of her family’s transition with her.<sup>91</sup> “I made the line between men and women blurry. And at the end of the day, that’s what Two-Spirits do, that was our traditional job, to help negotiate between the genders, so that they could understand one another.”<sup>92</sup> But with the blurring of tradition came many growing pains, nowhere more painful than with her grandmother. Once her best friend, Stó:lō matriarch Rena Point-Bolton struggled deeply to accept the woman her cherished grandson had grown up to be. “The Church and the Canadian Indian Residential School system (which only closed in 1996) have thoroughly accomplished their assimilationist goals in her,” Saylesh explained.<sup>93</sup>

In 2014, Saylesh published a now-famous article in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* documenting her journey to finding common ground with her grandmother. To broach this difficult conversation, Saylesh took up a call from her grandmother to all her grandchildren to join her in the Longhouse and begin learning their family’s weaving tradition. Over time, this educational experience turned into a reciprocal exchange of knowledge. For Saylesh, the subject was weaving cedar and spruce root; for her grandmother, it was Two-Spirit history. Within this exchange, Saylesh offered the following invitation:

I invite you Grandmother, to shape-shift your own thought process and open your mind a bit more and see that I am still, essentially, the grandchild with whom you shared a reciprocal loving relationship. I am not asking you to change who you are in principle, but rather, that you attempt to enhance your ability to be more at peace with diversity given your late daughter’s [Sailor] fate.<sup>94</sup>

While Saylesh felt like her grandmother had heard and understood what she wanted out of their exchange, she knew she would need to reciprocate in her own time. Additionally, Saylesh intuited that her grandmother felt let down that her cisgender female cousins had not stepped up to learn from her instead. But through their time together, Saylesh would slowly educate her grandmother on the unique and important roles of Two-Spirit people:

I explained to her that many Two Spirit people were not static in their gender, the way men and women are, that they have the ability to move between the genders and create a whole third one and be whatever they want. We are like tricksters [...] Like if we think about the Two-Spirits in Navajo Country or wherever the people have maintained their stories of Two-Spirits — like We:Wa, for instance, was elevated in her community — and they were often like magical. So they had a whole lot of respect. They were highly revered and gifted with many things. Weaving is one of them. So when I would tell her these things that I’ve come to learn

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Wesley, 2014, 345, with edits from Saylesh.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 342.

[...] she started to see that I was certainly different and gifted beyond any other student she's ever taught.<sup>95</sup>

Once Saylesh proved her dedication to carrying on the weaving tradition with quick mastery and ingenuity, her grandmother slowly began to soften. Studying Saylesh's impressive work, she declared, "See, that tells you who we are. When you come from this family, your work has to be exquisite."<sup>96</sup> As Saylesh explained to me, her family's cedar baskets and wool blankets are like their "crown jewels," and as the only grandchild to take up her grandmother's invitation to learn from her in the Longhouse that summer, it was and is up to Saylesh to continue that legacy.<sup>97</sup> Reflecting on her relationship to weaving today, Saylesh shared:

I guess if I dig deep, weaving for me is another form of literacy, and it helped me to not only solidify but transform the relationship I have with my grandmother to something that is healthier, to something that is mutually respectful, something that even after she's gone, I'll continue to story through my weavings.<sup>98</sup>

As beautifully traced in Saylesh's writing, this "surreal and miraculous," months-long exchange culminated in her grandmother conjuring up a new title for women like Saylesh in Halq'eméylem, *Sts'iyóye smestýexw slhá:li* (Twin-Spirit Woman).<sup>99</sup> "Because of her endorsement for me to become a weaver and her placement of that title on me, [it] branded me as somebody of worth to the community. And little by little the whole community started to see me."<sup>100</sup> Saylesh's goal in then publishing her story two years later for the world to read was twofold: first, to call upon all *Sisele* (grandmothers) "as the traditional makers of all laws on our matriarchal lands" to not just accept but *honour* their Two-Spirit grandchildren and, second, to provide the necessary space for other Stó:lō Two-Spirits to take on *Sts'iyóye smestýexw* (Twin-Spirit) identity as they saw fit. Most importantly, she wanted them to feel like they could finally "come home" to both themselves and *Stó:lō Temexw* (the land of the Stó:lō people).<sup>101</sup>

A year prior to beginning her weaving apprenticeship, Saylesh received the esteemed invitation to attend a memorial gathering for a late *Tseil-Waututh* (Burrard First Nation) Two-Spirit youth as an honoured guest and witness. In addition, she was asked to "open the floor" with a ceremonial dance, an immense honour.<sup>102</sup> To prepare, Saylesh and her grandmother spent two full months working on a cedar bark shawl together. With this shawl, Saylesh would be able to dance around the gathering floor "cloaked by my proud *Syemá:l* (Ancestors)."<sup>103</sup> Saylesh's growing mastery of weaving made her feel connected to the female weavers that came before her: "I remember when I was doing it. I had

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<sup>95</sup> Wesley, May 23rd, 2022, recording 4, with edits from Saylesh.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., with edits from Saylesh.

<sup>99</sup> Wesley, 2014, 343

<sup>100</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>101</sup> Wesley, 2014, 339.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 347.

this uncanny feeling that I'd done it before."<sup>104</sup> After grueling physical, emotional, and spiritual training, Saylesh had the great honour to open the floor for the mourning ceremony. Speaking to the gravity of this moment, Saylesh remembers,

I needed to dance for more than just this memorial—for five hundred-plus years of two-spirited ancestors and their deleted identities [...] Though the cape was heavy, it turned out that I had made myself wings. I made it around and, according to others present at the event, my feet did not touch the ground. It was a momentous occasion, and I still feel butterflies when I think about it today.<sup>105</sup>



*Saylesh wearing her cedar bark shawl (2012)  
photo by Charlotte Point*

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<sup>104</sup> Wesley, May 19th, 2022, recording 1.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.



## 6 – *Poleqtanot*

The conjuring of the term *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw slbá:li* by Stó:lō matriarch Rena Point-Bolton in 2012 was a miraculous and momentous occasion for trans and Two-Spirit people of the Lower Fraser Valley. As Saylesh's story gained momentum, this occasion would also gain notoriety and praise from people across the globe. Celebrated by scholars, activists, and community members alike, Saylesh's publication recounting the exchange with her grandmother would be read in college seminars, studied in activist spaces, cited in academic journals, and depicted through art and documentary. Most important to Saylesh, her story would inspire countless other Two-Spirit people working to decolonise their languages and (re)make space for Two-Spirit people within their nations: "That was the benchmark of my life [...] Not only could [Two-Spirits] come home, but they could also come home to themselves. And, in a way, they come back in as they are."<sup>106</sup>

But for Saylesh, the educational exchange in 2012 was only one part of her long and — at that point — still incomplete journey to "wholeness." In the years that followed, three life-changing events that would round out her transition into the woman she is today: a ground-breaking (re)naming ceremony in 2016, her gender confirmation surgery the following summer, and then her formal ordainment as a healer for her nation.

While Saylesh had received a title in Halq'eméylem, she was still without an appropriate, female *Xwélmexw skwix* (or Indigenous name) to be referred to, especially in the Longhouse. Despite ceremoniously dropping her birth name and beginning to use "Saylesh" at college in 1994, the acquisition of an appropriate *Xwélmexw skwix* — which she understands as her "true" name — would require an unprecedented breaking (and making) of tradition.<sup>107</sup> As an educator of Stó:lō youth, Saylesh's friend Dianna emphasised to me the importance and significance of young people receiving their *Xwélmexw skwix* upon graduation so they can "know who they are" once they enter the real world.<sup>108</sup> She also shared examples of trans and Two-Spirit Stó:lō youth today who have chosen these names themselves; another necessary break of tradition that honours Two-Spirit people's internal senses of self. Unlike the young people growing up under Dianna's care today,



*Saylesh at age 46 (2019) photo by Calvin Warbus*

<sup>106</sup> Wesley, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>107</sup> Saylesh Wesley, email exchange with author, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Kay, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Saylesh would live the first 44 years of her life without a *Xwélmexw skewix* that aligned with the woman she, and now everyone around her, knew she was.

As was the case for conjuring the title *Sts'iyóye smestýexw slhá:li*, Saylesh's grandmother would have to facilitate Saylesh's renaming. At a huge gathering in 2016, matriarch Rena Point-Bolton ceremoniously lifted Saylesh's male *Xwélmexw skewix* and placed it on her great grandson. Saylesh explained how this was unprecedented and, potentially, dangerous: "Once you give a name to someone you don't lift it off them because it could hurt them. Because that name is like a *shxweli*, it's a soul on its own. But she did it because she knew that my name wasn't appropriate for who I was."<sup>109</sup> To the huge gathering, Rena Point-Bolton baptised Saylesh in front of her whole nation: "my granddaughter is *Poleqtanot*."<sup>110</sup>

Reflecting on this moment in our interviews several years later, Saylesh wove the story of receiving her *Xwélmexw skewix* to her initial apprenticeship with her grandmother four years prior. Weaving, Saylesh explained, is "a soul thing" and, following Stó:lō belief in reincarnation, she suspects she must have been a weaver in another lifetime. "My mentorship under her wasn't typical," she explained, "it's like as if something bigger than both of us took what she could do and put it on me."<sup>111</sup> Learning that *Poleqtanot* — the ancestor whose name Saylesh now carries — was not only a matriarch but a skilled weaver, Saylesh wonders "if it's her that works through me and helps me to see where I'm going with a piece [because] the design, the quality, the tension [is] all subconsciously there."<sup>112</sup>



*Saylesh (5th from left) with her female relatives (2019) photo by Calvin Warbus*

On July 4<sup>th</sup> the following summer, Saylesh would pass her next concurrent milestone: gender confirmation surgery. Having achieved full self-esteem in the woman she is over time, Saylesh hadn't seriously pursued what our community refers to as "bottom surgery" in the first twenty years of her transition. Pointing to her heart, Saylesh explained how her transition "took place here, regardless of what my body does or what I do to my body."<sup>113</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Wesley, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 4.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

Comfortable and at peace with herself, Saylesh's choice to travel to Montréal in the summer of 2017 for surgery was instead driven by a traumatising event with her mom a few years prior. In 2014, Charlotte Point suffered three major aneurysms. For over a month, she had to be housed in the ICU at Vancouver General Hospital, at times tied to her bed for her own safety. "We don't know how she lived," Saylesh recounted, "and I was not ready to lose her because, like I said, she was *my person*. That woman that brought me down and put me in the lineup, and to watch her go through what she did [...] no one prepares you to know what to do or how to react."<sup>114</sup> Witnessing her mother — a queen in Saylesh's eyes — go through the indignity of being hospitalised, tied down, and under-serviced by overstretched nurses, Saylesh developed anxiety around what her own experience would look like if she were to ever find herself in the same situation:



*Saylesh (right) and her mom (left) at her sister's wedding (2001)  
photo by Robin Kelly*

I don't want to end up being like an eyesore or a freakshow or whatever, like I didn't transition for that reason. So that's why I did it [...] And I didn't blame myself, I wasn't judging myself. It's people. They're the ones that aren't evolved enough or open enough to be graceful, so I aligned myself completely.<sup>115</sup>

The third of three back-to-back milestones that defined these formative years was Saylesh's transition into becoming a healer for her community. By her auntie and uncle, Gwen and Steven Point, Saylesh was ordained to "become someone who serves the spirit."<sup>116</sup> From then on, Saylesh would be called to help people in her community who are struggling, pulling her across the province, sometimes various days of the week. A thousands-year-old tradition, what she calls "spiritual doctoring" has now become a core facet of Saylesh's everyday life.<sup>117</sup> No longer the outcast she felt to be as a child, Saylesh now fulfills a critical spiritual role for her people. "It was such a big time, such a huge transformation to experience all of that at once, all together, and everybody saw it. Everybody witnessed it. Everybody was there. And ever since, it changed my life."<sup>118</sup>

Reflecting on the impact of these three milestones on her life, Saylesh shared: "Ever since then it's like everybody forgot my story. I just became a woman in the community where it was easy for them to see me, and not just see me, but honour me as a respected woman."<sup>119</sup> After acquiring her female *Xwélmexw skwix* and undergoing gender confirmation surgery, her work with spirits has led her to

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

understand that “gender is just a human thing, it is not a spiritual thing [...] it’s like I’ve come beyond gender.”<sup>120</sup> This form of wisdom and transcendence, catalysed by these events between 2016 and 2018 would lead Saylesh into the next and current phase of her life: transcending into the Elder she was always meant to be.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

## 7 – Elder-to-Be

When I first met Saylesh on a drizzly, early summer’s night in Chilliwack, she informed me that she was coming into her “Crone stage” and was, at this point of her life, “more of a spirit than a human.”<sup>121</sup> Saylesh used the term “Crone” here intentionally, clarifying that it has association with “the esoteric things that are unknown to the world, which is what it’s like to be trans and Two-Spirit.”<sup>122</sup> Just minutes into our months-long collaboration on this biography, I began to understand what she meant. After 6 years of working as a healer, over 25 years since she began her transition, and nearly 50 years into this life, Saylesh is a magnificently confident but



*Saylesh at age 49 (2022) photo by Laura Wealick*

humble presence. Her brilliant one-liners, humorous retorts, and stern yet soft looks are the product of decades of experience as a leader, educator, and sought-out speaker in her communities. More than that, she possesses a spiritual and emotional intelligence beyond comprehension, which she would later describe as “soul intelligence.”<sup>123</sup> At various points in our conversations, Saylesh shared she was being driven by spirits to share certain messages, sometimes unsure of what was coming out of her mouth until after she said them. Once we got into our groove — me prompting with questions, her sharing stories from her life — it seemed like she could intuit each of the points I was hoping to cover in our time together. By our last interview, Saylesh proceeded to answer every question jotted down in my closed notebook without me saying a word, as if she could read my mind.

While I was certainly struck by Saylesh’s presence in person, I was surprised more than anything to hear about the many emotional weights she felt heavy on her shoulders at this point in her life. Having just recovered from Covid the week prior and a surgery on her large intestine earlier in the spring, Saylesh shared that she was ultimately unwell. In addition to physical health challenges, she feared she was beginning to lose her memory. Furthermore, she was catching herself fall into pits of depression. Most present at the time we first connected, though, was her experience of mourning. The recent death of one of her favorite country music artists Naomi Judd by suicide sparked an almost manic response of “brooding and hurting” in Saylesh.<sup>124</sup> After decades of personal healing,

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<sup>121</sup> Jamey Jespersion, Oral and Heart Memory Notes, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (see Archibald, 12); Saylesh Wesley, interview with author, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 5.

<sup>122</sup> Wesley, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 5.

<sup>123</sup> Wesley, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

though, this response was taking her off guard. Aside from idolising the Judds since she was a kid, Saylesh resolved that the star also reminded her of her mom who, since being hospitalised about seven years ago, had not been her full self. In a roundabout way, Naomi Judd’s sudden death triggered a second mourning of her mother and was sending Saylesh — someone deeply in touch with her emotions — down a path of self-reflection and healing. “Healing is lifelong,” Saylesh taught me, “it is not something that we ever stop doing.”<sup>125</sup> Joking about her upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in October, she added, “but any day now it should iron out for me.”<sup>126</sup>

No longer a kid in awe of the glitz and glamour of musical celebrity, Saylesh whole-heartedly understands the stress and pressure of being famous. By 2022, Saylesh has made a name for herself. In the years following her 2014 publication, Saylesh was — and still is today — invited to travel all over the globe to share her story. In a hilarious anecdote during our first dinner together, Saylesh shared about her experience being a guest speaker at a “Summit at Sea” cruise in the Bahamas. Rooming with fellow trans icons Tiq Milan and Geena Rocero, and even connecting with famous rapper Kendrick Lamar, Saylesh brushed shoulders with countless world-renowned artists, activists, and scholars. There, and elsewhere, Saylesh has been raised up on a pedestal for her contributions to scholarship, activism, and Two-Spirit resurgence. For Saylesh, though, her life’s work has never been about notoriety:

The prominence is wonderful. I think it’s necessary for the world. But I don’t need it. I just do it because it was put in front of me [...] And so I think I proceed carefully because I don’t want it to get bigger. I don’t want to be famous, and I know that’s a weird thing to say, but I’m really close to it. And I can’t imagine what that life would be like. I mean it sounds nice to have all the fame and the fortune in the world, but they’re prisoners.<sup>127</sup>

After many years of traveling and speaking, Saylesh is easing into living a quiet, more introverted life. In addition to fulfilling her role as a healer for her community and as an educator for the Chilliwack School District, Saylesh’s focus is now on self-preservation. Despite her many experiences and accolades, Saylesh feels deep exhaustion from decades of struggling to become who she is:

I’m very weary a lot because it isn’t a small thing to be trans; having to maintain the fitness I need to be magnificently powerful. Sometimes I wish I could just take myself for granted. Sometimes I wish I could just move amongst the people as one of them. But now I stand out. And I’m like a beacon. And it was necessary. However, it isn’t easy. And I guess that’s why now, I spend a lot of time alone. And I spend a lot of time processing and thinking.<sup>128</sup>

In a conversation about reincarnation, Saylesh emphasised to me how she is on a path towards “mastery” so she can finish this life, once and for all. According to a Stó:lō worldview, if one does not complete an obligation or healing while on Earth, they must continue to come back until they

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<sup>125</sup> Wesley, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, recording 3.

<sup>126</sup> Wesley, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Wesley, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 2.

do. But once one reaches the level of “master,” they may finally rest. “I’m working towards enlightenment,” Saylesh explained, “I’m working towards finishing this life, so that when it’s my time to go, I don’t ever have to come back. I can stay with the Creator.”<sup>129</sup>

In rigorous pursuit of personal enlightenment and healing, Saylesh inevitably suffers from loneliness and isolation. Based in rural Chilliwack, and as the eldest living trans and Two-Spirit person in her nation, Saylesh struggles to feel fully at ease with those around her. With her growing spiritual and emotional mastery, she also expressed increasing discomfort with being around people who are not yet fully realised “in their heart and soul.”<sup>130</sup> “I need whole people in my life,” she explained, “People who are true to themselves, who are good to themselves and good to others. People who are honest and have integrity. People who demonstrate class and emanate love. Those are my people. And there aren’t many of them. Not many. So that’s why I keep to myself.”<sup>131</sup>

As Saylesh ages, the generational gap between her and the vast majority of out trans and Two-Spirit people is also widening, making her feel “worlds apart” from most of the young people she comes across.<sup>132</sup> As a healer, Saylesh’s vibration also differs from most trans people, especially youth, who she describes as possessing “warrior” energy:

I like people to feel at peace around me. I like people to feel comfortable around me. I don’t like to impose anything on anyone like the radical political activist viewpoints or being trans [...] they’re like warriors, I guess. But I was always a healer. And so my vibration, my energy is different. And I’ve always been soft and gentle.<sup>133</sup>



*Saylesh at age 48 (2021)*

While her recent years have been marked by relative isolation, Saylesh did share the story of one beautiful, budding friendship with a trans man who also participated in Winter ceremonies like her. Out of nowhere, he passed away two years ago. “It was so comforting to see him when I did at gatherings because I wasn’t alone,” she recalled with a smile on her face, “And we would just see each other and just be like [exhales] it was a relief. It was — I don’t know how to explain it — like you’re not alone.”<sup>134</sup> Since his unexpected passing, Saylesh shared she occasionally refers to old messages from him for comfort. “He was just extremely grateful to me, and there was nothing but mutual respect and love

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<sup>129</sup> Wesley, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Wesley, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Wesley, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, recording 3.

between us,” she reflected, “that would have been a very strong potential for a beautiful friendship if he were still here.”<sup>135</sup> Seeing him head in the direction of academia, Saylesh also wished that he could round out her narrative and ultimately give it some balance as a trans man. “But it was just not meant to be. And so, like my aunt, who passed as well, he is now one of my ancestors or angels that I pray to for those nights or days when you just feel so alone.”<sup>136</sup>

Beyond trans and Two-Spirit community, Saylesh’s main anchor to this world is her husband of twenty years. “I am still very much a spirit,” she explained, “I can get caught up into the wind and get blown away very easily and he’ll just pull me back in. He is certainly my rock.”<sup>137</sup> Traveling back to Vancouver in 2002, Saylesh shared with me the story of meeting her husband for the first time. On a nice, sunny summer afternoon, Saylesh and Dominique were standing outside Starbucks on Robson Street. It being Gay Pride weekend, the two were exchanging about whether they — now well-established locals of the West End — would join in on any of the festivities. Overhearing their conversation, what Saylesh remembered as a “quintessential hillbilly redneck” interjected, “What’s going on this weekend?” Scanning him up and down, Saylesh remarked, “It’s a gay thing,” and turned back around. “Yeah... I know,” he retorted.<sup>138</sup> Used to receiving the attention of men on the streets, 30-year-old Saylesh felt like this guy was different. Instead of the more aggressive pick-up she was accustomed to, this man seemed respectful. After getting together and having fun for the weekend, though, Saylesh assumed they would go separate ways. A few weeks later, she received a surprise phone call.

“What are you doing this weekend?” he asked.

“Ummm, nothing?” Saylesh responded.

“Well, I’m coming into town,” he started, hesitantly, “Do you want to get together?”<sup>139</sup>

To Saylesh’s surprise, he came back to the city to visit and simply “never left.”<sup>140</sup> After the usual break ups and quick get-back-togethers that often define new, young relationships, Saylesh and her husband would eventually move back to Chilliwack together and settle into domestic life together. Today, Saylesh can’t imagine her life without him.<sup>141</sup> Reflecting on their relationship twenty years in, she shared:

It’s been a good ride with him. As much as it was a very windy road with lots of hills at first. It’s evened out and we’ve plateaued. And it’s like we’re coasting to the sunset together. Even

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Wesley, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, recording 2.

<sup>138</sup> Wesley, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 3.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.



with that it's still one day at a time. Well, here we are. We're together still. He is my partner. He's my anchor. He's the one flying the kite and I'm the kite.<sup>142</sup>

Now, as an Elder-to-be, Saylesh requires more grounding than ever. But while the process of transcendence certainly comes with many challenges, Saylesh is beginning to understand that her transition into an Elder actually began “the second” that she transitioned.<sup>143</sup> “My becoming an Elder is in a way a statement of declaring a position for myself,” she explained, “I have been Elder all along, I just didn't know it.”<sup>144</sup> Reflecting on her life, Saylesh also attributes what she now understands as her “neurodivergence” as a sign that she would one day have the skills to fulfill this role. “I don't move in the world the way most people do. I don't think the way most people do [...] But in a way, it gave me a few tricks or a few superpowers, like my ability to be compassionate because I'm different than others.”<sup>145</sup> As she's evolved into more of a spirit than a human, Saylesh has felt like a part of her brain has been “cleared” so she can now delve into a more spiritual headspace.



*Saylesh speaking on reconciliation & decolonization (2019)*

In line with her work with spirits as a healer — and signalling the kind of Elder she is crystallising into today — Saylesh ended our many hours of recorded stories with a series of prayers and lessons for readers. In honour of her wisdom, this biography concludes with seven of those teachings:

### **1. There is no perfect human being**

So I hope those words resonate with any reader, that it's a lot of pressure to uphold somebody and because we as human beings have these egos, they fall in line and accept those positions even though it's a pressure because they have to conduct themselves accordingly, and yet deep down that's not all. And even though they're well established and even, let's say, well-to-do and wealthy, are they exempt from low self-esteem? Absolutely not. Are they exempt from being so human that if they ever showed that side of themselves, they might lose their platform? Absolutely not. Are they that exotic idealised person that the media portrays them to be? Absolutely not. They are people, just like Naomi Judd.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Wesley, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, recording 5.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

We're all here solo. We're going to come into this world with nothing and we're going to leave with nothing. And the compassion and the love that you have, the forgiveness you were able to manage, the patience and the understanding, those are the things that aren't in your bank account when it's time for you to be called home to your happy hunting grounds. And so being in the flesh is very much a human experience. So therefore there is no perfect human being. We have these ideologies about historical figures like Christ or one of the Popes or Mother Teresa, but at the end of the day if you actually got to sit with them [...] they'd probably be the first ones to show you that they're human. They're just blessed like I was. And that blessing is a double-edged sword, because if you don't carry it with grace and humility, it'll eat you up, and you'll become greedy and jealous. And you'll want more, more, and more, and you'll never be satisfied with what you have.<sup>147</sup>

## **2. We are all good people**

Probably my favorite, favorite reminder from one of my late Elders: "We are all good people." He would say that every single time. He'd hold up his hands and say, "We are all good people. Sometimes we just need to be reminded of that. As long as we're trying, as long as we're doing the work to heal and to realise who we are, and to remember what our Elders left for us, then we are all good people." [...] And at the end of the day, trans or not, we all have a soul. We're all going to pass. But in the meantime, what are we going to do to be remembered? And I hope that memory is of good things. And that our children don't have to lose their innocence the way we did. That they don't have to get punished for being who they are the way we did. But there's a long way to go [...] We humans we need to grow up. We need to get over ourselves. And realise that really all we have is each other. All we got is each other. I know what pain is. I know what suffering is. I know what hate is. That's wonderful that I know what they are. And I'm grateful that I know what those things are because I wouldn't really know what love is and I wouldn't really know what compassion is. I wouldn't really know what happiness is if it weren't for those dark shadows. But I think we've learned our lesson, I think we know what darkness is. Now, do we have the courage to look at the light? Because it's up to all of us. We have lots of storms yet to endure. But just like the storms, are we going to find shelter like this to hide under?<sup>148</sup>

## **3. Be good to yourself**

If I want to continue making change in the world, I've got to continuously check myself. If I want to make change in this world, I've got to make sure that I keep my body healthy. Especially if I'm a healer. I won't be any good to anybody if I'm sick. And at 50, I've been humbled by my body, and the biggest part that humbled me was that I did it myself. My mom would tell me, "Don't do that. Believe me, you're gonna pay. You may not pay now, but you're doing the damage now. And it'll show up when you're least expecting it." And dammit she was right. She was right. Poor choices we make when we're young and the things that we eat and how we look after ourselves, it all adds up. So that's what I want is wholeness. In other words, not just spiritual evolution, but take care of your health. Be good to yourself. When you're having hard times and you don't really like who you see in the mirror, find others who

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

will help you do that to see the beauty that they see. You get yourself back up. Validate why you're feeling that way but carry on.<sup>149</sup>

#### **4. Wellness and wholeness for everybody**

I pray for wellness and wholeness for everybody. Because hopes and dreams can change on a dime. But the wholeness, that's hard to come by. And once you have it, it's hard to maintain. It's constant work. I hope we come to a place where we're not so driven by greed and by money, capitalism. [...] I hope and pray that people are able to realise that we all have both good and evil within us, and that they can make a conscious choice to default to the good, and to be humble and kind. And lift up anyone they see that's stuck in the mud.<sup>150</sup>

We have a long way to go. But I don't deny how far we've come. We have to empower one another. We have to help each other. We have to be kind to one another. But we can't do those things unless we are those things to ourselves first. So many that I've come to know who are all of those things, they're truly kind and good people, but behind closed doors they have nothing but hate for themselves, so therefore they're frauds. I have had to call myself out on my own fraudulent behavior a lot. And I will forever be a work-in-progress, as long as it's still forward, that's all that matters. Lots of backwards falls, but I mean you get up and you keep going. Especially when we're in the margins like this, we cannot afford to hurt each other.<sup>151</sup>

#### **5. To her white siblings**

For our white brothers and sisters to realise their white supremacy and privilege would be such a gift when they come to that place. And the last effort that they use it for is to help us. Because they put us here, and they're the only ones that can take us out. Like with residential schooling, I heard an Elder say [...] "Education got us into this mess. Education is going to have to get us out of it." And that's the same thing: "White supremacy got us into this. And white supremacy is gonna have to get us out."<sup>152</sup>

#### **6. To her cisgender siblings**

I hope and pray that people make space and keep space for anyone trans because we are the ones that demonstrate transformation in this world, good or bad. We embody it. And that people are able to get over themselves when it comes to their own identity. So I guess when I speak about that, I'm speaking to the cisgender heterosexual people. They don't even know that they're carrying themselves, let alone the idea of getting over themselves. Because they don't know their privilege [...] They have to see and realise their privilege and the harms that that causes when they don't use it with intention. I think privilege can be a very productive thing to have if you use it consciously. I think we're moving in a good way towards a new

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

Earth but it's hard to say given the circumstances and the state of the world [...] I have to continue reminding myself not just to believe that things will be okay, I have to know it. I have to know that things will be okay, no matter what the outcome. I hope that those of us who have struggled and endured what it's like to be trans in a time when there was no space or language for it appreciate what we've done and pick it up and grow it more [...] We're all just here together as these beautiful spirits, having human experiences, sharing space and sharing good food. And I hope that we come to a place where people are able to reconcile with their egos, because right now there is too much pain and sorrow and hate and lies that are running the world. So there's people like you and I, on the trans spectrum, who have no choice but to be crawling on our knees all the time. To show what it looks like to be meek and humble. I can't imagine a better Earth where everybody is like that. Everybody is kind and compassionate. Everybody is loving and supportive, nonjudgmental.<sup>153</sup>

## 7. Finally, to her trans siblings and descendants

I want the world to know that we are magical, that we are a gift to humanity. And it's so critical that we be acknowledged as such because we've been condemned for thousands of years. There is a lot of reparation to do, just like there is for Indigenous people as a whole. It's one thing to say that we're reconciling or that we're making things right. I don't know that people understand to what extent that they have to do that. There's so much work to do. So much. Having reality TV shows and having legalities put into place – like we're allowed to change our gender marker now without surgery, we're allowed all of these things that have been changed – it's wonderful. But we're only a drop in the bucket of where we need to go.

It's a lot for me to ask that we work towards coming to a place where beautiful trans souls like you and I can breathe, no matter where we are, we can breathe deep. That's it. Because as it is, we can't. That's why we're magnificently powerful. We have to find our own sanctuaries and define them for ourselves. Everybody else doesn't have to do that. People get to be who they are everywhere, anywhere, anytime. And if we're not afforded that privilege, I guess we have to create it. And I want to inspire and give reason to all of those in the margins of our gender identity, to evolve, to heal, to realise that they are worthy of their very breath. They are worthy to use their entire lung capacity. They are worthy to express their thoughts and ideas, and that they are able to see themselves in the mirror as whole and beautiful people.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

“This journey towards our own authenticity never ends. Now I see that my life hasn’t just been for me, it’s been for the world. Now I see that all of that suffering and hopelessness — the hell that I thought I was in — hasn’t been in vain. My making peace with it not only gave me peace but also that peace was so big and powerful that it affected the whole world around me. **These stories have so much power, so much influence. They need to be told. The world needs to know**”

— Saylesh Wesley (2022)

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Thank you, Saylesh <3



*Saylesh (right) with the author (left) (2022)*