

Uncovering Belonging

Season 1, Episode 9

Heartspeak with Grandmother Kim Wheatley: Part 1

Erin (she/her): Jade, there is so much richness in everything that she's saying. So I'm thinking that we make this episode into a two-parter.

Jade (they/them): My God, I think you're so right on that.

Jade Pichette (they/them): I'm Jade Pichette (they / them).

Erin Davis (she/her): And I'm Erin Davis and I use the pronouns she and her.

Jade Pichette (they/them): Welcome to Uncovering Belonging,

Erin Davis (she/her): a podcast that explores the professional and personal stories of unique voices of what it means to belong

Jade Pichette (they/them): and the journey to finding our authentic self.

Jade (they/them): Well, Welcome, Kim.

Kim: Hello to both of you and thank you so much for welcoming me.

Jade (they/them): Traditional Anishinaabe grandmother Kim Wheatley, (she / her) is Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Caribbean in ancestry. She is a band member of the Shawanaga First Nation, located on the shores of Georgian Bay on Robinson-Huron Treaty territories and is Turtle Clan. She carries the spirit name “Head or Leader of the Fireflower” and has worked for three decades with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Canada. As a multi-award winning speaker for over three decades, Kim has appeared locally, nationally and internationally in books, magazines, television, radio and numerous news articles. She is a published author, hand drummer, singer, water walker, artist and ceremonial practitioner. Kim is committed to forging good relationships based on acts of reconciliation that honor the past, connect to the present, and contribute to the future.

And just as a content note for our listeners, that she will be mentioning issues of colonization violence later in the program.

It is such a pleasure to have you join us we've work together now a couple times, which has been absolutely so lovely, including Pride at Work Canada's Spark event, so you got to meet my co-host Erin there. So Erin, do you want to start us off

Erin (she/her): Absolutely. So welcome, Kim. So grateful to have you here with us and I had the absolute pleasure of hearing you present at the Pride at Work Canada Spark event, and I would love for our audience to just hear a little bit more about your story.

Kim: You know, our journeys is what people will remember. your story. And my story began by becoming a mom and having to advocate for my children who were not being accepted as community members because of their biracial background. And we know that identity is the foundation upon which a lot of people decide to judge and/or include you. and in school, what I saw was a repetition of ostracizing of my children who spoke up about Indigenous identity. And, as an Indigenous woman in this country, I'm very aware that our stories are still the great unknown, even though we're in 2023. And I'm very aware that we are very much curiosity and you know, if you're not wearing your leather and feathers, somehow you are less than as an Indigenous person. And we have this historic burden of blood quantum in the Indian Act that has really supported a colonized approach and expectation about who we are and how we will present. So I started advocating for my children.

I wanted to protect them. And I also wanted to insert authentic voice in a space and place where it was really quite absent, which was in the public school system. So this was in the late 80s. And I found that my children were being punished for speaking out and speaking up. And I was proud of myself that they would do that because I must have raised them right in some ways.

But it was also frustrating for me because I experienced my entire education through being silent and hiding my identity. And my children were proud of their identity. And so they would stand up and correct the teacher on terminologies or identifying words and so I started volunteering to go in and just offer some educational workshops. This is what we call ourselves. This is what we look like. This is what regalia is. This is the words we use, not only to support my children but to really improve the educational experience for a school that had a high Indigenous population.

And while they did have some Indigenous teachers there, they were busy doing the work that they were hired for. They didn't have time for kind of the more cultural sensitization slant. And it was a school that was primarily a school of great diversity and colour, but , a lack of awareness. And then that expanded into events and eventually got to universities and colleges.

And I just started getting invited by word of mouth to come and speak and then actually getting paid. Realizing that I need to take it to the next level by actually having some sort of a handle. Everybody wants a title, right?

And so I chose the title, Cultural Consultant on cultural, because that's my area of expertise.

I came into my own healing and wellness and reclaiming of my identity through ceremony. after experiencing a great deal of struggle and harm and diminishment as an Indigenous woman, but also as an Anishinaabe woman who fully embraces not only her identity, but found a place of belonging and healing within that identity that is somewhat normalized today.

But when I first started, people were still searching, and we had the challenges of not having public presence and public invitations and no real foundation to engage with because there was just a lack of it. So I found a niche, I jumped in and I've grown in that work and here I am today in 2023, over 30 years later, you know, considered somewhat of an expert realms and an active participant in ceremony still to ensure that what I'm doing is, you know, right on the pulse of truth and what's happening in our communities.

And then we have this new term that's come out, right? Diversity, equity and inclusion.

I feel like this term is well intended, but it is another smokescreen to again divide and kind of put on the back burner. Well, ticked that box and I don't want to be a box tick. So I'm challenging

Erin (she/her): Thank you so much for sharing your story and this genuine connection to becoming a mother seeing how your children were experiencing the world and being there to help them find that sense of belonging. And by doing that, you found your own. And I have two kids as well, and we could probably have a really lengthy conversation on the biracial conversation, 'cause that's my lived experience.

And it's always been , how do I live between two worlds? And maybe for your children, that's part of their, teaching that they can offer and create the change that we want to see in this world.

Kim: Agreed, agreed.

Erin (she/her): One of the things that you said, and I find it an interesting concept in the space of diversity, equity, inclusion, because I say it myself that I'm not an expert,

but I'm on the journey to learn with you and through you. And so tell us more about this idea where you say, "I'm somewhat of an expert," yet you have 30 years of experience you just spoke to so what does what does that mean to you?

Kim: So the journey's continuous. It's not a static journey, right? You have to breathe life into it all the time. As people evolve, grow, and learn and become a bit more familiar, perhaps a bit more educated, a bit more rooted in what the truth is, what you find is you have to bring it up to the next level and the next level.

And the levels are endless. I mean, I think I'm going to learn for the rest of my life. This is why I still participate in ceremony. And every time I go, even if it's a teaching I think I've heard before, I am receiving it in a different way because I'm a different person at this moment. I can pull out different concepts and understandings.

I can evaluate where I was and where I am now in a way that requires that constant engagement, that constant attendance, that constant embracing so that growth is continuous. And we and we see this reflected in the natural world. So when you look at the natural world, You have your spring, your summer, your fall, your winter, and you see how the plants change throughout those seasons.

I feel like we're like plants, you know, and we evolve throughout the seasons and then we come back again. And over time, you know, that little sapling becomes this gargantuan beautiful tree. And I feel like I'm just getting to the point, especially at the age and stage I'm at after 30 years, where I actually have a nice big tree.

You know, I'm not a little sapling anymore and I have a lot of branches and I have a lot of leaves And I have a lot of seeds to offer because at the end of the day everything that I've come to learn came from somebody who came before me and somebody who breathed life and lived life aligned with those values and

with those concepts and with those challenges to insert our voice in our presence in a contemporary sense and where I feel there's a big gap is we're only thinking about history. So I'm not gonna forever be that sapling. You know, I've become this tree with a nice solid trunk and lots of leaves and branches you know, the diversity of who I am is kind of captured in that analogy in some ways. And there's this pushback in the Canadian mainstream mind, one, not to give up the historic amnesia that makes everybody feel so comfortable and secure 'cause then they don't have to address the wounding and the healing that needs to take place and the responsibility that caused us to be in this position where I had to step forward and say, I need to insert my voice to help here.

And the resistance for change and the idea that we can't be contemporary citizens without the leather and feather accoutrements is ridiculous. Every other culture is allowed to evolve on the earth and they have to walk around you know with their traditional outfits and housing and way of life to be accepted and yet the expectation for Indigenous people at large is this very great comfort in homogenizing who we are.

Well, you don't sound like one, you don't look like one, you don't dress like one, you're pretty educated for one. And get a lot of this kind of reflection, which shows a lack of rootedness and growth in foundational truths and the brilliance of who we are and the great diversity of who we are today.

every realm, every realm that you could imagine as a job or an educational space or whatever it may be. We are everywhere, but we're not running around saying, "I'm Indigenous first." What we're doing is inserting our way of knowing in a contemporary realm and kind of exemplifying another way of knowing first.

And that, of course, that other way of knowing comes from Indigeneity as the foundation. But I find it so frustrating, you know, to go to a school in 2023, and the children want to go and see what horse I rode in on or how big is my teepee. And then you can see the failure in your seed planting, because this is the second time you've come to this school.

So what did the teachers do last year, in preparation for me? And how did they learn? And,

you know,

How did they prepare the students for our contemporary contributions? And not only that, but the great diversity of how we present. You know, so many times, I'm not responsible for my genes, but I have curly hair.

And so many times people ask, well, I thought Native people had straight hair. Why do you have curly hair? And then there's this kind of rabbit hole, you go down, well, you're not really Indigenous enough. And then we have the struggle of pretendianism, you know, that's on the rise. And this is the latest almost witch hunt that's happening externally and internally in our communities that is really again creating a silencing and a dismissal of authentic voice and another way of knowing.

And when it comes to our children who have biracial identities, can you imagine how much more magnified that is, where they are being forced to accept being in one place or the other. And we know this, especially when it comes along conversations about gender, right? We have two genders that people are supposed to align with.

And in our cultural concepts, we don't have that. We multiple genders. So for me, it's like a no-brainer. But we still have to assert ourselves in the world as some sort of an identity that makes others feel comfortable and may not reflect our actual internal truth and sense of belonging. My children and my grandchildren comfortable with both of lineage and how that dynamic works.

And they feel like they should fluidly be able to travel between those without saying, "Well, you're not Black enough. Well, you're not Indigenous enough. Well, well, well." Who gets to decide that? You should be able to assert that in your own right not only should you be able to assert it, but you should be able to walk it back as to why. You know, put the onus in the other person's lap to learn rather than to judge. And that's hopefully what I'm doing in the work that I do, is I give you the tools to learn so that you're not coming front-facing with judgment and expectation. You're opening your heart to receive the heart speak that we're offering and the encouragement to embrace us as how, you know, we, present ourselves

Erin (she/her): I love that concept of heart speak so much. If only we could find a place to always start from there. I think it would change our world I wanna say thank you again for sharing with us this foundation that you've built. I can envision this tree, but this acknowledgement that you are still growing, that you're still learning, that you're still taking on these opportunities and I know Jade wants to talk a little bit more about the challenges that we face working in this space.

And so I'll turn it over to you Jade.

Jade (they/them): Thank you, Erin. So I know that you touched on some of the challenges with the school system and that being kind of one of the impetus for why you've got into this work, and you're being brought into more and more of these spaces And so I was wondering what you see as some of the challenges of doing this work in the workplace. And I think you've touched on some of them.

You've touched on homogenization, you've touched on tokenization, you've touched on pretendians or people who are pretending to be Indigenous. and so certainly those are some of the things that I'm sure are some of the challenges, but do you want to expand on any of those or are there others that people should be aware of?

Kim: Oh, Jade, you know, the list is long. And those just come off the top of my head, because those are probably the regular things I encounter on a daily basis. But you know, we've got all these reports, all these studies that have been done on Indigenous people to try and help them overcome, basically, cultural genocide in this country as mandated and funded by, you know, our governance

system

and we're not going to forget about that, You know as, we continue to unearth children's bodies in these graves that are unmarked and unrecorded, and we ask questions, you know, like, who's accountable for this? And I always ask, what stories, what gifts did we miss in that process?

We've got the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls report. We've got the Truth and Reconciliation report with 94 calls to action. Most people in Canada feel like this is Indigenous work, this is Indigenous stuff, it has nothing to do with us, we don't need to do any work. Most people have not read those, let alone Coles Notes versions of the calls to action to manifest real meaningful change, not only for us to receive healing, but for Canadians at large to normalize our continued presence, because the idea that we are a disappearing race and that somehow we're just going to be gone has not been successful.

Resilience is magnified in our communities with all the harms committed against us, over the last 150 years has not worked. We're still here. You know, the residential schools didn't work. The assimilation, the Indian Act is not working. It's being challenged. It's one of the most revised racist acts in the

world. You know, the Indian Act is what apartheid in South Africa was framed upon and that has since been dismantled.

But in Canada, we're still controlled by this act that is dehumanizing and archaic and really breathes life into the idea that we are disappearing. Our languages are disappearing, our people are disappearing, our elders are dying. and there's not a lot of hope seeded in that. But , I want to challenge that.

We're still here, we're brilliant, we have things to say, we're educated, we're articulate, we don't all live on the majority of

us live in cities, we have something to say about everything. But the most important thing that Canadians need to remember is that we are sovereign citizens We are not part of the melting pot or the diversity pools. We have our own unique standing because all of Canada is built on stolen land, and Canada will never be able to repay us for that. Canada also holds billions of dollars, trillions I think now, in monies as a trust for us that we can't even access freely.

We are still ostracized if we live on reserve in these places of forgetting. Most people don't know that just in Ontario alone, there's like 135 First Nations communities and the great diversity of who we are and the languages and the identities and, you know, our cosmology is too much for most people to begin uncovering and wading through.

And you don't have to do that. We're here. Let us help you. Let us make it appropriate for you. Let us introduce you to who you would most commonly interact with. So in southern Ontario, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee people are two of the largest language speaking groups

so get to know us and learn what we call ourselves. You know, normalizing another language is difficult, but I'll tell you this, in 150 years, well, I guess in the last 500 years, we've learned all of the different languages that are spoken around the world, how people dress, how they eat, how they pray, but not even a micro percentage in this country has learned one of our languages, can identify a nation of people and speak about it with some sort of comfort and confidence or speak to it, not about it, because really nothing about us without us, right?

It's our job to do that. But, you know, to be able to show true allyship by having that proficiency. The two recognized languages, official languages, are French and English in this country. That comes from France and England. They have their countries. We have over 60 spoken languages in this country. We have lots of choices.

Not even one of them is recognized as an official language. Now, how could that be in our home as sovereign nations? There's zero recognition of us. The upheaval that we had over Jilly Black's changing of one word in the national anthem showed that we are ready for change.

Jade (they/them): .. In case you're wondering, this is in reference to the NBA All-Star Game traditionally the lyrics said "home and native land" and was changed to.

Kim: the truth in changing just one word was powerful.

and so, when I talk about challenges and when I talk about obstacles, I'm not the only one who's doing it. and not all of us get a space in place like this platform to share our ideas. And these come from our beliefs, not just our passions. They come from absolute truths that are rooted in a historical colonial bank of just abuse, you know, continued genocidal agendas.

And it doesn't matter if we become politicians and get voted into our position. The system itself is dysfunctional. It needs a rework. And it's not working for Canadians at large, as we saw in the last election, where they had the lowest voter turnout in history. And I think that's only going to continue.

When people are ready for change, you have to be ready as a country to hold a sense of accountability about that, and then move forward with actual meaningful changes. And I feel like we have two ears in one mouth. So, you know, I always say in teachings, we should listen twice as much as we speak. But I feel like Canadians act like they have three mouths.

They're always talking, but they're not doing anything. You have two feet, put one foot in front of

You know, use those as well. feel I don't know what to do to help. You can use your voice. You have privilege and power beyond most Indigenous people in this country to some degree, because you're not subject and subjugated by the Indian Act and by your sheer identity.

You know, people can come from all over the earth here and they're going to get food, they're going to have access to water, they're going to get homes, they're going to get medical care. We, the original inhabitants of these lands, struggle to get those kinds of accesses. It is limited and it is always racialized.

So how are we getting a step forward here? You know, it's through talking about it again and again, reminding people, My experience is not going to be the same as yours based on my physicality, how I present. You know, as a person of colour, I am immediately judged. and even in the educational system or the medical system or the policing system, I know that I'm racialized all the time.

There's this assumption, just looking at me without even hearing me speak, that I am somehow less than. And I don't believe in that. The brilliance of this country, the relationship we've had for thousands of years, puts us in a place of excellence We have so much to offer. And just think how much different this country could be. It could truly be inclusive. It could truly embrace diversity. It could truly be a space where you could be safe. I don't feel safe in this country. I feel like I'm a target in lots of ways. And I'm tired of that.

So this challenge of feeling unsafe, this challenge of wading through igneous, this challenge of trying to spoon feed others so that you can just begin to even feed the seeds that I'm giving you, is labor intensive, it's a huge emotional load that I have to carry, and I can't see it diminishing anytime soon.

Erin (she/her): Jade, I'm gonna pause this for a second and I think we need to make Kim's episode into two parts. There is so much richness in everything that she's saying. I think this constitutes two episodes.

Jade (they/them): You're so right on that I mean, the amount that we've just gone over in this last little bit I'm really excited for us to have a part two.

Erin (she/her): Let's do it. We're inviting you to join us for part two, and until then, stay curious, share this episode, and keep the conversation going.