



Episode 29: Weaving Stories of Healing and Hope with Monique Gray Smith

Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

[00:00:00] Roxy Manning:

Hi, I'm Roxy Manning.

[00:00:19] Sarah Peyton:

And I'm Sarah Peyton. Welcome to another inspiring episode of Fierce Compassion. Today, we're honored to be joined by Monique Gray Smith, an award winning, best selling author, consultant, and speaker of Cree and Scottish heritage. Monique is the proud mom and the author of nine books that span readers across the lifespan, sharing wisdom, knowledge, and hope.

[00:00:44] Roxy Manning:

Known for her storytelling, spirit of generosity, and focus on resilience, Monique's work communicates the important teaching that love is medicine. In this episode, Monique shares her journey as a writer and how her own family history informs her work on resilience and reconciliation. We explore the concept of self-compassion from an Indigenous perspective and how it relates to intergenerational healing and community connection.

[00:01:14] Sarah Peyton:

Monique also discusses her children's books and how they serve as tools for social justice and intergenerational dialogue demonstrating her unique ability to connect audiences with both information and heart.

[00:01:30] Roxy Manning:

This powerful dialogue examines the importance of Indigenous storytelling and education, the power of Orange Shirt Day, and how stories can be a bridge to understanding, and reconciliation.

[00:01:42] Sarah Peyton:

Join us as we immerse ourselves in a heartfelt conversation that inspires us to reflect on our own stories, our connection to community, and how we can contribute to healing and hope in the world.

Monique, thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:02:15] Monique Gray Smith:

I'm honored to be with you today. Thank you for hosting me.

[00:02:18] Roxy Manning:

Monique, I'd love if you could share a little bit about where you are in the world for our listeners.

[00:02:23] Monique Gray Smith:

Mm hmm. I'm joining you today from the traditional territory of the Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc, part of the 17 nations of the Secwepemc people. Colonized name is Kamloops, and some people might go, oh, that sounds familiar, because in 2021 this is the community that publicly revealed the finding of the 205 remains of children behind the residential school here. The condo that we have just sort of overlooks the school and the powwow arbor. And that's where I'm joining you from today. I feel very, very privileged to be a guest on these territories.

And it's, it's kind of interesting because this is mostly where I grew up also. We moved a lot when I was a kid. Until my mom finally said to my dad when we were in grade five, we're not moving anymore. And we moved a couple more times. And then in grade 10, she said to him, we're not moving anymore.

Sadly, he kept moving and we stayed here. I graduated from here and I went to college here until I went to Vancouver for nursing school. So sort of as we were saying on the beginning of the call that life, life works in miraculous ways. And here I find myself kind of back in my hometown as my daughter starts her third year of social work here at the university.

[00:03:48] Roxy Manning:

So there's this weaving.

[00:03:49] Monique Gray Smith:

There is so much weaving. Yeah, it's some days it's really beautiful and some days it's a bit tender.

[00:03:59] Roxy Manning:

And I know you mentioned that this was one of those tender moments for you reflecting on the horror of that residential school and what it also meant personally for your family.

[00:04:09] Monique Gray Smith:

Yeah, my mom's partner, all of his family went to this school. He's a day school survivor. Yeah, but the ripple effect throughout community and, and really, you know, when I think about the writing that I've done, a huge part of what I've written has been about attempting to uphold the dignity of those who survived residential school and their families.

And not only that, policy and legislation in this place we call Canada, but, you know, my mom was a survivor of what's known as the Sixties Scoop. You know, she was born in 1940s, so she was removed at birth because her parents weren't deemed as fit - because they were Indigenous or that my grandfather was Indigenous - to care for her.

And that policy went on for generations, and we have day schools, and we have the TB hospitals. We have numerous, just like in the United States, there are numerous policies and legislations that have impacted our thriving and our ability to have a sense of self determination to plan for our futures.

And I think the time that we're living in now. That so much of that is changing, that, you know, I think of my children, I think of my niece, I think of young people I have, you know, it's very inspiring what they're doing and they're also growing up like in our province every student that graduates now has to have had an Indigenous education course.

[00:05:40] Roxy Manning:

Wow.

[00:05:41] Monique Gray Smith:

So, that's really powerful when we think about the future. When those young people become decision makers, when they become elected leaders, when they become community leaders that might not have been elected, but they're leaders, they will make decisions differently because they understand history. They understand the importance of relationships to each other as humans, but also to the land and to the water, to all living beings, to the stars.

So to me, it's exciting times. But it also means we have to reach back, right? And understand the truth, understand where we are today. And then how do we reach forward? And that's the place we're in as we get to decide, how do we want to reach forward? And so that's why I write what I do is to help children and young people and adults have the capacity to really think about the truth and then how do I want to reach forward.

[00:06:41] Sarah Peyton:

One of the things we always start with, or often start with, is what self-compassion means to you, if it means something to you. And how it has moved you. How do you practice self-compassion? Where do you see it in the history and resilience of Indigenous communities and the way things have grown and changed in this last century, really?

[00:07:04] Monique Gray Smith:

Well, I guess I'll start with me, and I'll have an example. As I was sharing with you at the beginning of the call, my mom passed away a few months ago, three months ago, and so being here in this place that is so much her has brought up lots of feelings for me.

And the other night, my daughter had some things happen with her courses, and my wife was getting ready to come up and be with us, and she was trying to figure out what she needed to pack, and, and Sadie came out and was telling me these things, and I was like, I just kind of looked. And then she's like, Mama, sometimes you're not very compassionate.

At first it was like a sting, but then it was like, oh, no, no, no. I'm being self-compassionate here, because I can do nothing for either of you. And if I extend that energy, then I don't have it for caring for me and in this moment and right now I have to be caring for me so that I can also care for you when there's a way that I can be of support other than listening.

And so I think that's one way, right, is that sometimes we have to, I guess it's boundary setting kind of, but it was also really in that moment my own compassion and that I think in this time I have a little bit of fatigue also about extending compassion and I just have to have this self-compassion.

And when I think about it in regards to the books, like I think about my children's book, *You Hold Me Up*, that's illustrated by [Danielle Daniel](#). And it's like, you hold me up when you play with me, when you listen to me, when you share with me, like all these examples. And I think that is an example of compassion, because when we realize that there's ways that we hold each other up, and when we look at history, there were so many ways that we were not held up.

[00:09:09] Sarah Peyton:

Yeah.

[00:09:09] Monique Gray Smith:

Through policies and legislations, but also through dignity. And when we think about trauma, when there has been an impact to our dignity, that is a form of trauma. And it is intergenerational, and that's what's being disrupted a little bit, I think, is part of that dignity. When we look at globally what's happening, we see so many places in the world where our humanity is not being held up with dignity. And you know, it's so interesting because there are some school districts in Michigan that have banned *You Hold Me Up*.

[00:09:43] Roxy Manning:

Do you have any sense of what their rationale is?

[00:09:51] Monique Gray Smith:

I don't. I wonder if they banned all Indigenous books. I wondered if they banned books that help children understand that we are in reciprocal relationships. Right? When I hold you up, then at some point you hold me up. And if you can't hold me up, then somebody else will. And I don't extend that energy because I expect them to be held up. I extend it because I care, because I'm compassionate, because I see and experience your humanity. And that's what I think we all crave is for our humanity to be experienced.

[00:10:29] Roxy Manning:

There's something that's coming up for me as I hear you. It's this piece around the intergenerational trauma, even this role of compassion and self-compassion, because I think part of. What you're talking about is that these policies and removing children from their families, all of this disrupted the capacity of our communities to care for each other, to be able to hold each other up. And it's something that we've had to relearn.

And so when I hear you talking about self-compassion as being able to recognize when you are low resourced and when you need to care for yourself in order to be able to joyfully act in care and hold someone else up, it's like that is something that we're relearning rather than the sense that I always need to be there, I always need to show up. Yeah. So I'm really appreciating this kind of weaving in of how do we respond to the generations of traumas that Indigenous folks have had to experience in, at least, both of our countries, and really in communities worldwide.

[00:11:29] Monique Gray Smith:

Mm hmm. For sure. And I think that's part of why, to me, it's exciting times is because the more we understand trauma, we know that, yes, you know, in our communities, we've called it blood memory for years, right? Or cellular memory. Today, science calls it epigenetics. That knowledge, right? That in our cells, we carry the history of our ancestors. And so much of the work has been focused on trauma in regards to epigenetics. And I think where we're starting to tip a little bit is to talk about the joy, to talk about the laughter, to talk about what kept us alive in those times when the policies and legislations were designed for us actually not to be alive.

[00:12:13] Roxy Manning:

Yes.

[00:12:15] Sarah Peyton:

As you're speaking about ancestors, my thoughts keep coming back and back to your mom. And I wonder if it would be okay to hear her name.

[00:12:24] Monique Gray Smith:

Shirley Smith. Yeah, her name was Shirley.

[00:12:27] Sarah Peyton:

Oh. And just... is there anything you want to say about how she contributed to your work and to this?

[00:12:34] Monique Gray Smith:

Oh, wow. Oh. Thank you for asking. On the one year honoring of the children who never came home from Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, they had a celebration in the arbor down here, the Powwow arbor. And my mom was 82, and she received her first drum. At that celebration, a young person gifted her a drum from the gifts in the center of the arbor.

And so I'm working on a book right now. It's actually in the final edits and illustrations have started. It's called *Kookum's First Drum*. So "Kookum" is grandma in Cree and my mom's language. And it's loosely based on her story, but I've had to change the ages a little bit because the editor's like, how do we have an eight year old grandson and an 82 year old grandma? So we changed the ages a little bit, but it's really is about a child coming home. to visit his Kookum, who's just moved down the hall in the apartment. She tells him the story about the day of getting his first drum. First of all, she asked him when he comes in, what was the best part of your day? Which is one thing my mom used to ask my sister and I when she would tuck us into bed. What was the best part of your day? And so, Kookum asks the grandson in the story, his name is Charlie, what was the best part of his day? And he says, Oh, drum class with Mrs. Rude. And she's like, Oh, I got a story for you, Charlie.

So she takes him and shows him the drum and he's like, I don't understand Kookum because, like, I'm eight and I have my own drum. And so she tells him about the 60s. So she helps him understand another element of policy.

So it's a book for children to understand that there were other policies and legislations. But it starts with him saying, you know, Wednesdays are my favorite day because I get to hang out with Kookum. And at the end she says to him, you know, I was at the friendship center today and I saw that they have drum group on Friday night. And he's like, oh, we could all go as a family. So at the

end of the book, it says, now I have two favorite days of the week, when he gets to hang out with Kookum and then the drum group when they all go together.

So that's one way, but you know, she was always a champion. Yeah, I have all of the copies of the books that are written that were hers. Here in the condo. So that's very special to have, you know, all those books that were hers that I'd written.

[00:15:17] Roxy Manning:

Yeah.

[00:15:18] Monique Gray Smith:

Yeah. In the last couple years, she wasn't able to read. She was a voracious reader, and the last couple years she wasn't cognitively able to kind of absorb or pay attention for very long. She kept trying to read *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults*, and she'd read a chapter and then she'd call me and she'd tell me all the ways, like, that's what we used to do at home, and this is what happened. So even though she didn't get very far in the book, she got very far in the book.

[00:15:51] Roxy Manning:

Yes. Yeah.

[00:15:53] Sarah Peyton:

I just love hearing about her. I'm just so grateful that you're telling us a little about her. Yeah.

[00:15:59] Roxy Manning:

Yeah. Yeah. I'm also just connected to this very tender joy of being able to contribute back to her. Like, it sounds that through your work, you are not only helping readers, people who are not familiar with Indigenous communities, and Indigenous children to understand their heritage, you are helping our elders to reconnect with what was sweet, what they lost. And so I'm just getting the gift that this work has been for so many people.

[00:16:26] Monique Gray Smith:

Thank you. That was why, you know, when I first wrote my first novel, *Tilly: A Story of Hope and Resilience*. Well, it was a self published book first, and then it got picked up and published. But when I wrote it, well, I had a near death experience, and I had been getting messages to write for twenty years. And I kept thinking, who am I to write a book? And then one day I had this incredible massage Reiki treatment in Toronto and these ancestors came to visit me in the treatment and they're like, write the book! We've been telling you to write a book! And they had been for 20 years. I have all kinds of stories of people saying to me, you should write a book.

And so when I left there, I started to ask myself a different question. I started to ask, instead of who am I to write a book, I started to ask, what would I write about? And I think that the questions we ask ourselves are so important, right? Like, there's times when we experience something very painful when the question is like, why did this happen? Those are justified in the moment, but 10 years later, we have to be asking a different question. What is the blessing in this? How can I move forward? What did I learn from this? And I think that that's part of what's happening now, and it does not diminish the trauma of what happened.

But you know, it's like yesterday I was doing this visualization and my mom came, and it was the first time she's visited me like that since she died. And in so my mom fashion, and not rudely, not shamefully, she was just like, you gotta stop moping around, chum. It's like, and then interestingly, like, my left foot got so itchy, it's like, I gotta take the next step, right? Like, these messages come, it's like, yes, be in the pain, be in the grief, but we can't stay there all the time. It doesn't serve us, it doesn't serve the gifts we've been blessed with to create, or however we're to contribute. But it's a fine dance, right? To know...

[00:18:39] Sarah Peyton:

Such a fine dance.

[00:18:41] Roxy Manning:

You've already mentioned *Tilly and the Crazy Eights* and *Tilly: A Story of Hope and Resilience*. There's this theme of resilience, right? How can we heal from the trauma that we're experiencing? And that's a theme that's running through all of the books that you write. And so I wonder if you can speak a little bit about the way that you're weaving healing and resilience throughout all of the different narratives and how you see that supporting this next generation, because a lot of your books are for young folks. So how do you see it supporting young Indigenous readers as they read these stories?

[00:19:12] Monique Gray Smith:

Yeah, that's a really interesting question because I don't think I ever do it intentionally. Like *Tilly: A Story of Hope and Resilience*, when it was self published, it was called *Hope, Faith, and Empathy*. So the title got changed once it got published. And there's days when I'm like, I don't like that word resilient, because I don't want to be resilient anymore. I don't want to have to be resilient anymore. And it is, you know, part of our lived experience still, though. The ability to bounce back, right?

I did for years so much reading about resilience, kind of from Western academia, and then one time I was in a Northern Ontario community doing some work. I was there for a week doing youth

workshops. And on the third day, I was packing everything up and a young woman came back into the room and barely audible, she said, can I talk to you? Barely audible, she asked, can I talk to you? I said, of course, and I sat down on the couch, and she sat as far away as she could get. And then we just sat there. And my body language let her know I was present with her, but she didn't say, can you talk to me, right? She said, can I talk to you? So I just had to hold the space.

It was probably 12 minutes, and it was uncomfortable. And then she started to talk, and she talked for over two hours. And when she was done, I asked her, when things were really hard, where would you go? And she kind of lit up a little bit, and she's like, oh, I'd go to the goose camp. And I'd pull out a lawn chair, and I'd sit there, and have good memories, and maybe light a fire, and poke at the fire. And I said, And who would you go visit? And she lit up a little more, I'd go visit my Auntie Pauline.

And that visit with that young person really started me thinking about resilience from a more like community way, instead of the Western academia, about how and who do we need to help us bounce back. And at times, how and who do we need to just hold us?

You know, I have a friend who two years ago, both of her girls left to go to school to Montreal from Victoria. That's a long ways away. And her husband would take her to the forest and find a bay of moss for her to lie in. It's like, oh! Like what beautiful compassion for her, right? So when I say that, it's like, yes, as humans, we can hold each other, but sometimes we need to stand by the cedar tree, or we need to sit by the water, or dunk in the ocean to cleanse off.

So I think about resilience like, I think about these four blankets, right? The first one is the strong sense of self, like knowing who I am, where I come from. Beginning to understand the gifts that I've been blessed with and how do I use them to contribute. Sense of family and yes, for sure, that can be our biological family and, and sometimes it's family of choice, right? People that come into our path who become like family. And sense of community is the third blanket. Because when children and young people and all of us have a sense of community, we feel like we belong. And when we feel like we belong, our moral compass operates differently. And then the fourth blanket that really weaves it all together is culture and language and connection to the land and the water and the stars.

And I think, you know, lots of times when I present this to educators, I say like, yes, for sure this is an Indigenous way, or a way that I, as one Indigenous human, thinks about resilience, but it isn't only for Indigenous kids. Pretty much any child or young person, once you get them outside, within three to five minutes, you see them change. Right? And part of that is, you know, the earth's

floor, that first inch and a half of the earth's floor is called hummus. And when we smell it, the cortisol in our brain, the stress hormone goes down, and oxytocin, the love hormone, goes up. So the more we're outside, I think the healthier we are.

[00:23:35] Sarah Peyton:

Yeah. Yeah.

[00:23:36] Monique Gray Smith:

It was a very long answer, Roxy.

[00:23:40] Roxy Manning:

Yeah. I'm actually loving it and especially the piece around how this is for every child, right? Even just every adult. I think so many of us have lost the connection to the possibilities of what we can do to restore ourselves in these really stressful times.

[00:23:57] Sarah Peyton:

And you've been really giving us a sense of the way in which the stories that you write kind of carry messages of love to your community and to all communities. And you're also giving us a sense of how many years it took to get started.

[00:24:18] Monique Gray Smith:

I know! I was 44 when my first book came out. And honestly, after I did the self-published book, I was like, okay, I've listened, I'm all done! And then, you know, I got this publishing contract for *Tilly*. And then one day, I was doing some training, some trauma training. I'm trained as a psychiatric nurse, and then I did more training around trauma, especially working in community, having that understanding. And I was doing some trauma training with a Head Start called [Future Four Nations](#) and Mission BC and at lunchtime the children joined us. And you know what happens, right, when 33, four-five year olds come in a room, everything changes, right?

But there was a little guy who stood by the door. His temperament was a little more cautious and he was looking around for his person. And then he locked eyes on his kookum, his grandma, and he ran right over to her. And she took his face in her hands and she looked at him with so much love, his whole body changed. And what I saw was like his heart filled with happiness.

And so I was like, what fills my heart with happiness? Then I thought about it some more on my ferry ride home and off and on for a couple of weeks. And then that book came when I was in a meeting and it's called *My Heart Fills With Happiness*, illustrated by the incredible [Julie Flett](#), published by [Orca Book Publishers](#) in 2016, and it's kind of had a life of its own, that little book.

But had I, you know, picked up my phone right away or not been paying attention, I would have missed that moment of witnessing so much love. And I think when I do visits in schools, that's what I always talk about is we got to pay attention because life's passing us by. This hustle, this grind that we're supposed to be part of, life's passing us by. So just slow down a bit and pay attention and, and feel and see what's really going on . So that was the next step. And then things just kind of kept unfolding.

[00:26:27] Sarah Peyton:

When you think about yourself as a little one. Do you already see the seeds of being a writer and a noticer in those early years?

[00:26:38] Monique Gray Smith:

Oh yeah, I was, yes. I was a storyteller in my family. My cousins and I would write, put on plays, and my dad used to joke and say to me, now Monique, did that really happen or is that one of your stories? Yeah, even as an introvert, right? Like, I really am an introvert, even as an introvert, there was still always storytelling. It was part of what helped, I think, soothe and heal me and allow me to be present in this world that is, at its best, a bit messed up.

[00:27:14] Roxy Manning:

Well, one of the books that you've written is *Speaking Our Truth*. And first, it's just heartbreaking, right? And it's because you really share, in language that's accessible for young folks who are reading it, but in a way that's unflinching, an understanding of both what the experience was and what the impact of the experience was of the policies and especially the residential schools. And I think I remember you sharing that you didn't really want to write this book, that it was really hard to do. And then you felt really overwhelmed and struggled to write the book as you were doing it. And I'm wondering, what were some of the challenges with writing a book with this kind of content? And what kept you going?

[00:27:57] Monique Gray Smith:

Well, I had never written nonfiction and I had never written for this age group. So I really didn't know what I was doing. You know, my own family stories are in there. So that was part of the tenderness for sure. And while it is a book that focuses on residential schools or in the US known as boarding schools, I also wanted the reader to understand that that wasn't the only policy and legislation that impacted our thriving, our wellness, our connection to the land, our responsibilities to the land, to all living beings. So there's a breadth of history in there. That was one of my key decisions.

I had the incredible support of my family and the publisher. You know, most of my children and young adult Orca Book Publishers and that's intentional, because they have taken such amazing care of me and their own cultural safety and cultural humility is really, really profound.

And so when you're doing this kind of work and you know that your editor, you know that your publisher has you and will support you and holds you up and knows that there's difficult times, like there was twice, literally, I called Ruth, the publisher, there's two publishers at Orca, Andrew and Ruth, I called Ruth just saying, like, I can't. Like, I can't anymore. I just can't. And she's like, don't go anywhere, Monique. I'll be there in a moment. Right? Like, and then she comes to my office. So there's just ways that the writing of that book and the editors, Sarah, it wasn't just me. There were many people.

And what I really wanted out of that book was the reader to understand history, because for most readers, that's the very first time that they will be understanding the breadth of the truth of the history. And to also understand what programs and what, like, what's happening to foster the thriving, to foster the joy, to foster the love, to foster the light, that there's so much happening. And, you know, right around that time, I had become friends already with [Phyllis Jack Webstad](#), who was the founder of Orange Shirt Day. And this is how much things have changed. I remember calling her to interview her for, Speaking Our Truth, and she's like, yeah, happy to do an interview, but I'm working graveyard as an accountant at the gas station. So I have to do it between 11 p. m. and 7 a. m.

So Phyllis is the founder of what's known as Orange Shirt Day, September 30th here in Canada, also actually now known as National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. It is based on her story, at seven years of age, going to town from living kind of out, as she says, sometimes out in the wilderness in her reserve. Going to town with her grandma, and her grandma saying, you can pick out a new shirt because you're going to school tomorrow. She was going to residential school the next day, and she picked out her favorite color, bright orange shirt. And then when she got to school, it was quite forcibly removed, and she never saw it again. And experienced quite horrific things while she was at that school. And so wearing the orange shirt and that first day for her, which 2013 was the first day that she publicly talked about and wore orange shirts at Williams Lake. And now, you know, 11 years later, it's, I don't like to say it's a holiday, but it is known as a national day of truth and reconciliation in our country, Orange Shirt Day, September 30th.

And it surprises me, you know, last year I was asked to do a visit with a class in the state of New York and I got on, there was 18 classes. I wasn't ready for this, to be honest with you. I got on, and they all had orange shirts on. I was like, so it took me a moment to be able to kind of not be

discombobulated. So when I think about the courage of one person telling their story and reclaiming an orange shirt. And what has happened across our country and into the United States of people wearing orange shirts on September 30th and many other days is just a reminder to us that the truth of the history isn't so far back.

Like in our country, the last school closed in 1996. That's not very long ago, right? So, when I think about *Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation*, that book, it brings people in, like Phyllis, so young readers go, oh, that's why I wear an orange shirt. Because not all educators, yet still understand the stories about why we do things, right? And it's in the stories about why we do things that make, when I put on my orange shirt, a different experience than just putting on my orange shirt, right? It's like, yeah, I put on my orange shirt because Phyllis couldn't.

[00:33:07] Sarah Peyton:

Yeah, right. Yeah. That's quite. Quite something. I'm still in that moment of imagining you opening and seeing all those folks all in orange shirts.

[00:33:20] Monique Gray Smith:

Eighteen classes of children all wearing, yeah, it was just my, you know, I was on Zoom and I had all those little Brady Bunch boxes and I was like, yeah, it was a moment I will always remember.

[00:33:36] Sarah Peyton:

And so we're really kind of holding both the importance of family and we're holding the importance of community as a central theme, as a weaving together. How has your own community supported your journey as an author and an advocate?

[00:33:56] Monique Gray Smith:

Well, especially in Victoria, there has been immense support through the [Friendship Centre](#), through my friends, through community. Yeah, like I just think about, I don't know, it's kind of weird to talk about in that way, like because it's like family, like I wouldn't be able to share like I do without that support. And so to be able to kind of talk about it, I'm finding hard because it's like a spiritual experience and it's hard to put sort of a Western way of telling that experience, the emotion of being supported by community and by family.

[00:34:47] Sarah Peyton:

This sense, as you're speaking of, both the inadequacy of words, of course, but also of immense interweaving.

[00:34:54] Monique Gray Smith:

Mm hmm. Yeah.

[00:34:58] Roxy Manning:

One of the questions I was actually thinking about is, you got this insistent invitation from the ancestors to tell the stories, to speak and share these stories. And one of the things that we do in the podcast is we're trying to highlight people who are doing things that are in some ways might not be seen as social change, might not be seen as a movement towards social justice. And I'm definitely experiencing your work as a force of social change, but I'd love to hear your thoughts about this. How are you seeing storytelling as a tool for social change and where would you like to see it going?

[00:35:39] Monique Gray Smith:

Oh, I think it's a very powerful tool for social change because when we share stories that and I'll use the word you keep using, Roxy, when we share stories that weave into people's hearts and their minds, they're not able to forget those stories. And they're not able to forget how they felt when they either heard them or read them. And so, their moral compass also changes. Right? So if they're at a dinner party, for example, and somebody makes a comment, they might have laughed before and now they're not laughing. They may not yet have the courage to say anything, but they're more aware of their own discomfort. And then the next time they might be able to say something.

Because sometimes still on our journey also, when that first opportunity for social justice in our smaller community settings emerges, if we aren't practiced, we don't really quite know what to do, right? And then we go home and we're like, I wish I had said this or done that. And then the opportunity will present itself again. And then we're ready.

[00:36:52] Roxy Manning:

You know, I can learn. All of the things that you talk about, I could learn it as like an intellectual exercise, right? There could be this history book that says, here's what happened in indigenous communities over the last century. But if I don't actually hear the stories, it stays in this very cognitive domain and it doesn't move my heart. It doesn't inspire me to notice the feelings that come up when I hear that joke or where I see some injustice happening. So it's this bridge from the intellectual understanding that these things happened to the relational bit that helps us to feel connection that this is part of me, not something separate from me.

[00:37:27] Monique Gray Smith:

Mm hmm. Thank you for sharing that. When I sent in my first draft of *Speaking Our Truth*, it came back very fast from the editor, Sarah, and I was on a flight. I was going to do some work in Prince Albert, so I had to stop in Calgary, went Victoria to Calgary, Calgary to Saskatoon, and then a drive.

In Calgary, I got the edits, and the email said, have a seat. You need to cut 20, 000 words.

[00:37:59] Roxy Manning:

I know that feeling!

[00:38:04] Monique Gray Smith:

That's like half a book. What? And I just closed my laptop and I got on the plane and I'm like, so I had another hour and a half flight and I was thinking about it a lot. What am I going to cut? Like, it's all in there. And then as we were flying into Saskatoon, we were going over the river. And what came to me was, the river runs through the land, like the stories run through our blood. And that's what I knew had to be in the book, was the stories. So it made it really easy then to piece off some of the things that were like, nope, not this one, not this book, not this book.

So even, you know, like little, *My Heart Fills with Happiness*. It has, I don't know, 184 words. It is a book about social justice because it's about all the ways that fills our heart with happiness. And it ends with that question, what fills your heart with happiness? Right, like most of my children's books end with a question because when my twins were little and we would read to them, they loved any book that had questions in it.

And what I also knew, you know, when we were snuggled up is that they would answer the question. They almost always turned to us to ask the same question, which is why I wanted that question at the end of *My Heart Fills* because I knew that most children would be reading that book, perhaps before naptime or bedtime. So before bed, their brain is thinking about happiness. That stress hormone or cortisol gets a little bit less, right? They have an easier transition to sleep. And then they would have the potential for intergenerational healing by asking the adult or the cousin or whoever's reading to them the same question, what fills your heart? So I never intend for them to be social justice books. But I do think that they have that element, for sure.

[00:39:59] Roxy Manning:

They absolutely do.

[00:40:01] Sarah Peyton:

We can always tell if the book is a social justice book if it's being banned in the United States. As you look ahead, what projects are you most excited about? Anything you want to share? How do you see your work evolving?

[00:40:23] Monique Gray Smith:

I have a book coming out in April, illustrated by the incredible [Nicole Neidhardt](#) - we've done a few books together and she did all of the illustrations for *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults*,

incredible Dene illustrator - called *Dreaming Alongside*. And it's about all the places that children dream, both at the dream time, but in our lived daily time. And just that reminder that, you know, when a child's staring out a window, we have no idea. They might still be fully paying attention, but they might also be dreaming. And it ends with, you know, I have lots of dreams, but I wonder, like, what are your dreams? Where do you like to dream?

Same with *I Hope*, right? The children's book illustrated by [Gabrielle Grimard](#) had asked that question at the end also. I have lots of hopes for you and for me, but I wonder, what are your hopes? So books that have children starting to talk to us about their hopes and about their dreams. a vocabulary that I didn't have growing up. But when we start to think at a young age about hope, about possibility, about our dreams, the ability then to make those into reality is a bit higher.

[00:41:38] Sarah Peyton:

I'm just so enjoying and loving this invitation to intergenerational connection that I just, I'm feeling in all of these stories and everything that we're describing.

[00:41:52] Roxy Manning:

I wanted to name, like, tagging onto what Sarah just said, I'm a parent also, and there's something about how much we as parents want our children to have a different experience. And so all of our energy goes into, how can I give them a different experience? And you're creating the possibility for our children to feed back to us so we could start to shift the stories and the ways of being that we have accepted as this is my role in life, right? It's like you're inviting parents to find their own sense of hope and dreams and possibilities. So I'm so appreciating that.

[00:42:28] Monique Gray Smith:

Thank you. And then the other piece that I'm working on that I'm really excited about, it's an adult non-fiction. It'll come out in January 2026 and it's called *Sharing the Light*, a collection of stories and reflections. I've been thinking so much about, you know, how do we share our light with the world? And what do we need to be able to do or feel in order to be able to share our light? And then when are the times in our lives when we need other people's light to shine on us so we can kind of replenish? And when are the times we have to protect our light? Right? Like the balance of those. So I've been talking about the emotion of gratitude. All good things begin with gratitude. Gratitude, love, joy, hope, and happiness. Those emotions that when we cultivate them, then we have more light to share.

And in the deepest darkness, you know, like these last three months after losing my mom, every, I've had for years a practice every morning before my feet even hit the floor of like, what are three

aspects of my life I'm grateful for? And there were some mornings where it was really hard to start the day that way, but it helped, it kind of brought a little bit of light for the day. So each of those emotions have stories in them. Sometimes there's just one, like in the chapter of hope, you might open and all it says on that page is, persevere. Right? So it's kind of, it's going to kind of be a book where you might read from the beginning to the end, or it might be a book that you just have on the table and you're like, oh, I need a thought for the day, or I need an inspiration for the day, or I need an idea for the day. So I'm really excited about that book, for sure.

[00:44:22] Roxy Manning:

I'm going to be tracking it and looking for that publication date.

[00:44:28] Monique Gray Smith:

Yep, January 2026, published by the [House of Anansi Press](#).

[00:44:33] Roxy Manning:

Wonderful. We'll make sure we, if there's a webpage for it already, we'll link it on your podcast page so our listeners can find it. And you've given us already some really great ideas, but we always ask every guest this, what would you like our listeners to do in relation to your work? It might be something they can reflect on, a way to get involved or practice. What's an action that you would encourage them to take?

[00:44:59] Monique Gray Smith:

Hmm, to either read something by an Indigenous author from where they live, or an Indigenous illustrator. I say Indigenous Illustrator also because they really do bring stories to life. You've probably heard, I mentioned the illustrator for almost all of my books.

You know, one time I was in the province of Prince Edward Island touring with *My Heart Fills With Happiness*, and we'd gone around the circle, I'd ask the children, you know, what fills your hearts with happiness? And the answers always are so beautiful. And the answers are always about our presence with the C E, right? As adults in their lives. It isn't about the presence with the T S. It's never about things. It's about people and experiences. It really, it blows my mind every single time, and I don't know why it still does, but it, I think it blows my mind out of gratitude, like, oh, it is still about relationships. It's still about family, about community, about belonging. And this little guy put up his hand and he said, sometimes the person who draws the pictures tells the story better than the person who writes the words. I was like, yeah, that's true.

So that's why I say for people to look up and see the Indigenous people where you live, who's writing stories, who's drawing stories, and start there, start where you're living, and then go out from there.

You know, there's lots of books that talk about the truth, and there's lots of books that talk about the truth that involves love and joy and laughter. So I think we have to navigate what level of the truth, and it's not that we're in denial, but there are some days when I can't read some pieces.

[00:46:52] Roxy Manning:

Right.

[00:46:53] Monique Gray Smith:

There are some days when I have to read something else, so that I'm strong enough or in a place again to be able to read the other pieces.

[00:47:01] Roxy Manning:

It sounds like another form of self-compassion to be able to honor what I have capacity for in the moment.

[00:47:07] Monique Gray Smith:

For sure. Yeah.

[00:47:10] Sarah Peyton:

Well, Monique, it's been an absolute honor to have you with us your work is just so inspiring and heart touching, and I'm sure that the folks who are listening will take away so much from this conversation. Before we go, where can our audience find your books and learn more about your work? Do you have a website? Do they need to go to Orca Books? How do we find you?

[00:47:37] Monique Gray Smith:

Well, first, let me say thank you for hosting me and holding such beautiful, compassionate space for me today. I do have a website, Monique Gray Smith, G R A Y Smith. Just Google me or find me on the website. Talks about the books, the courses I do, the public speaking. There's some videos there. People want to see some pieces, especially right now as we're getting into here in Canada, especially, you know, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, there's some videos there that help people understand.

I'm also on Instagram. It's more of a personal account. You know, yes, I'm an author, but I'm a mom, I'm a wife, I'm a daughter, you know. So Instagram, my name, Monique Gray Smith. Facebook, my name, Monique Gray Smith. If you're still on X, I'm in and out, but I'm at ltl drum, L T

L D R U M. And mostly I post stuff on there to engage educators, because there are still a lot of educators and librarians on X, and their roles are so important. And the wellness of our communities and our future.

[00:48:45] Sarah Peyton:

So true. I want to just thank your Cree, Lakota, and Scottish ancestors for them bringing you to us and also Shirley Smith for you, for bringing you to us. I'm just having a real sense of gratitude at getting to hang out with you.

[00:49:07] Monique Gray Smith:

Thank you. Yeah, it's been a beautiful visit.

[00:49:12] Roxy Manning:

Thank you. And I'll just end with a message to our listeners. Thank you all for joining us again for another episode of Fierce Compassion. We will definitely have links to Monique's websites and her different social media accounts, so be sure to explore her books and important work that she's doing. And until next time, stay fierce and stay compassionate.

[00:49:40] Sarah Peyton:

Thank you for being with us. If you enjoyed this episode and are finding value in these conversations, please help us spread fierce compassion by taking a moment to share this episode with a friend and rate and review the podcast on your podcast app. This helps others find us and helps make sure these conversations reach everyone who might benefit.

[00:50:04] Roxy Manning:

If you would like to receive live one on one coaching from Sarah or me on a special episode of the podcast, or you want to find out more, follow the link in the show notes or visit our website. You can find our books, *How to Have Antiracist Conversations*, and the *Antiracist Heart* and learn about our podcast guests and new classes on our website, antiracistconversations.com.

[00:50:30] Sarah Peyton:

And Roxy and I love teaching and we're always offering new classes, courses, and other opportunities for learning in our own individual work. You can visit us at roxannemanning.com and at sarahpeyton.com to learn more about our individual offerings.

[00:50:48] Roxy Manning:

We hope to see you.