

Killing the Wittigo

A husband and wife headed out one autumn to find a winter campsite and stockpile game for the long winter ahead. One day, the woman is tying snares nearby when she hears rustling in the bush. When she turns, she comes face to face with a horrifying figure: a giant, hairy man in tattered clothes whose shoulders and lips are gnawed away. It's like this giant man has gone insane with hunger and eaten his own flesh. The giant is grinning at her, his teeth too large for his mouth. The woman knows this is Chenoo, the terrible cannibal creature. She knows she is in trouble, so she decides to be kind to this creature, in the hope that Chenoo might spare her life. She says, "My dear father! My heart is glad to see you again. Where have you been so long?" Chenoo, who always hears screams of horror and fear from the humans he encounters, is so amazed at her reaction that he cannot speak. In the silence, the woman reaches out and takes his hand. Chenoo allows himself to be brought into the family's wigwam. "Dear father," the woman says, "I am sorry to see you in such a state, dirty and with worn clothes. Please make yourself comfortable." She brings Chenoo a birchbark basket filled with warm water and also brings him some of her husband's clothes. This kindness is new to Chenoo, so he stays quiet. He bathes himself and changes his clothes. Then he sits by the fire. He is sullen and sad but quiet. When the woman goes outside to chop wood for the fire, Chenoo follows her.

She thinks, This is it. He's going to kill me now and devour my flesh. Chenoo says gruffly, "Give me the axe!" The woman hands the axe over quietly, expecting to die at any moment.

But instead of attacking her, Chenoo begins to split the wood. The woman watches as great logs of pine are split in an instant. She has never seen such chopping! Wood is tossed everywhere on the ground, and it looks as if the family's winter camp has been visited by a hurricane. "Father, we have enough now!" the woman cries. Chenoo puts down the axe and walks back into the wigwam, taking his place by the fire, silent once again. As she is making the woodpile, the woman hears her husband return from the bush. She runs to greet him and tells him about Chenoo. She tells him of her plan, and her husband agrees that her strategy is wise. So he agrees to do the same. He, too, will be kind to Chenoo.

“Dear father-in-law!” says the man when he enters the wigwam. “Where have you been for so long? Many things have happened. It is good to see you return.” Chenoo stares in amazement, but as he listens to the man talk about hunting and family and events in the community, Chenoo’s fierce gaze changes into a gentler, more human look. The man and his wife eat and offer Chenoo food. He hardly touches his meal, though, and lies down to sleep instead. The man and his wife lie awake in terror all night, sure that Chenoo will devour them in their sleep. But the only thing Chenoo does is move his bedding away from the fire and toward the door. “The fire is hot,” he says. The man and his wife know that Chenoo’s heart is made of ice, so they understand why he needs the cool air to shield him from the heat of the fire. For three days, Chenoo stays in the wigwam. He is sullen and grim and does not eat. Then on the fourth day, something changes. He says to the woman, “Do you have any tallow?” She says, “Of course. How much would you like?” Chenoo fills a large kettle with many gallons of tallow, puts it on the fire until it is scalding hot, then drinks it all at once. Chenoo then becomes very sick. He goes pale and vomits up all the horrors and atrocities of the world, things unspeakable and horrendous.

When it is all over, he is changed. He lies down to sleep. When Chenoo awakes, he asks for food. He eats a lot, and afterward, he stares at the fire as usual. But he is no longer sullen and surly. Instead, he is kind and good. The woman and her husband can see that they do not need to be afraid of him anymore. Chenoo lives with them throughout the winter. During one intense blizzard, when the snow keeps them inside and all they have is the dried meat from the snares, Chenoo says, “I am tired of this small meat. Tomorrow, we will go hunting.” After the sun rises, Chenoo, who used to be so withdrawn and sad, flies fast over the new snow. He uses his medicine power to catch a small shark, which he makes grow to many times its size. Chenoo and the man come back with enough meat to feed the three of them until the spring. The wife does not want to touch this strange meat, but the husband tastes it and finds it good. He and Chenoo feed on it, and they all live together as friends.

One day, Chenoo warns the man and his wife that another chenoo is coming to kill them. This chenoo is coming fast, on the wind from the north. This chenoo, he says, will be far more angry and far more cruel than even he had once been — so they must fight. Chenoo does not know how the battle will end, but he knows he

must try to keep the woman and her husband safe. So Chenoo asks the woman to bring him his bundle, which has been hanging from a tree since he arrived at their wigwam. He tells the woman, "If you find something inside my bundle that offends you, throw it away. But make sure to bring me the smaller bundle inside." The woman goes to the tree, opens the bundle, and finds a pair of human legs and feet, from one of Chenoo's earlier frightful and revolting meals. She throws the flesh far away into the forest and brings Chenoo the smaller bundle. Chenoo removes two dragon horns from this bundle, keeping one for himself and giving one to the husband and his wife. He tells them that these are magical weapons, the only ones that will work in this fight. "Stay back until after the chenoo screams," Chenoo says. "If you hear this scream, it will kill you. But if you hear me scream, then the danger has passed. If I ask for you, come running. Bring the dragon horn. You may save my life."

The husband and wife do exactly as their friend says, hiding deep in the bush. When they hear the evil chenoo arrive, they hear a sound like screaming thunder. They cover their ears and writhe in pain, almost dead from the sound. Then they hear their friend scream in response, and they know they are no longer in danger of dying from the other chenoo's sound. The battle begins, and the fight is fearsome and forbidding. The chenoos, in their rage, grow to the size of mountains. Trees are torn from the ground, and the ground trembles as if there is an earthquake. The conflict goes on until Chenoo says, "My son-in-law! Please come and help me!" The man runs to the fight, and when he arrives, he sees two giants, taller than the highest clouds, struggling on the ground. The evil chenoo is on top of Chenoo, trying to force the dragon's horn into his friend's ears and eyes. His friend is rolling his head from side to side, trying to escape the evil chenoo. This evil chenoo mocks his friend. It says, "You have no son-in-law to help you. I will take your cursed life and eat your liver." The man is so small in comparison to the giants that the evil chenoo does not notice him. He creeps up to the evil chenoo. Chenoo says, "Now! Use the dragon horn!" and the husband pushes the horn into the evil chenoo's ear. When the dragon horn touches the evil chenoo, it grows in length. It pushes through the evil chenoo's head and out the other ear, and when it senses ground on the other side, it changes direction, pushes downward, and pins the evil chenoo to the earth, taking firm root. Chenoo says, "Now, take the other end of the dragon horn and place it against a nearby tree."

As soon as the dragon horn touches the tree, it wraps itself around the trunk like a snake. In this way, the evil chenoo is held tightly and unable to escape. To avenge the evil chenoo's threat, Chenoo takes out the chenoo's liver and eats it right there, in front of him, before he is even dead. Then Chenoo and the man begin their long and weary work. There is only one way to kill an evil chenoo: they must be cut into tiny pieces and all the flesh and bones put into the fire. Everything must be consumed by the flame. If even a small fragment of flesh or bone is left unburned, that small fragment will sprout again into an evil chenoo, as large as the original one, and with all the evil force of the first creature. The hardest task is melting the evil chenoo's heart, because it is much colder and much harder than regular ice. When they put the heart into the fire, it almost extinguishes the flame. But they watch over it, stoke the fire, and eventually the ice heart breaks into small pieces. Then Chenoo and the man take these small pieces and break them up using a hatchet, to make sure they melt completely away. Then they return to the camp. When the weather warms, the snow changes to water and flows with the rivers to the sea. The man and his wife also move toward the sea, and Chenoo, with his softened soul, goes with them. The husband and wife build Chenoo his own canoe.

After many days on the river, passing through fast-flowing rapids and gliding under forest canopy, they arrive in sunshine on a beautiful lake. Suddenly, Chenoo lies down flat in his canoe. He says, "I have just seen another chenoo, standing there on top of the mountain. He cannot see me right now, but if he does see me, he will become very angry and will attack. I do not know who will win that fight. I want peace."

The husband and wife tow Chenoo's canoe for a while, but when they finish crossing the lake, Chenoo says that he can no longer travel by water. So they tell him where they plan to camp that night. Then the husband and wife paddle easily down the river, following the flow. Chenoo walks over mountains and through woods in a very long, roundabout route. The husband and wife think he will never reach them that way, but when they arrive at the place where they plan to spend the night, Chenoo is waiting for them by the fire, which he built for them. As they travel farther toward the village, great changes come over Chenoo.

Chenoo's fierce and formidable face is now that of a normal man, and his teeth are of normal size. He no longer grins wildly or stares at others all the time. His

flesh has healed, and he is no longer hairy or a giant. He becomes so weak that the husband must carry him like a little child. When they arrive at the village, the wife sends for her mother. When the mother sees Chenoo, she knows that he has travelled far and that he is very tired. She tells her daughter, “He must be cared for like a child for a few days. Then he will have to go on a fast, so that his spirit helpers will reveal themselves to him. Once he does this, he will be strong and we will introduce him to the others.” When Chenoo hears this, he feels grateful, and his heart is at peace.

European anthropologists have long been fascinated with what they call “wittigo psychosis.” To them, the Indigenous fear of wittigo possession is a culture-bound mental illness, and killing a wittigo is a way for Indigenous societies to get rid of people who are experiencing mental health challenges. Not only is this conclusion ethnocentric — with “culture-bound” serving as a label to group together and marginalize all non-European beliefs, and European values about the supposed “worth” of people who are experiencing the symptoms of mental illness superimposed onto Indigenous cultural practice — but it is also incorrect. Disconnection and a lack of self-control are dangerous threats to collective societies. Historically, the wittigo represented the balance between the individual and the collective and illustrated the dangers of selfishness and over-consumption.

When Indigenous people claimed they were possessed by the wittigo, it was a way of stating that they felt disconnected from other people and unable to control their feelings or desires. As a symbol, the wittigo represents core ideas within Indigenous belief systems, illustrating what happens when individuals turn away from the values of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationships that are central to Indigenous cultures. The well-being of the individual depends on staying in balance in both the internal and external worlds, and the well-being of the community depends on the individual’s ability to regulate greed and excess. The consequences for endangering community well-being were severe. Children were warned never to let the wittigo near, and adults were told that wittigos had to be killed. Although the wittigo’s place as a symbol for greed and selfishness persists in today’s world — neo-liberal capitalism and the environmental destruction that accompanies it can definitely be seen as wittigo possession and/or cannibalism — the wittigo has taken on many other forms in the contemporary Indigenous world.

Today, it represents the lateral violence that fuels the intergenerational cycle of trauma within Indigenous communities, as the possessed person engages in predatory behaviours that are a threat to the collective. The wittigo also represents the distress of an Indigenous person who has experienced trauma, whose daily life is impacted by unresolved emotions that are eating them away from the inside. Today, the idea behind killing the wittigo has been distorted, describing the tendency for Indigenous people with unresolved anger and fear to gang up and condemn in others what they most fear within their selves, to the point where their victims — those they bully, harass, and act aggressively toward — are redefined as the perpetrator in order to justify a witch hunt. This has happened to countless Indigenous people who have been targeted within dysfunctional communities and workplaces, in situations ranging from whisper campaigns to harassment to wrongful dismissal.

The wittigo also represents the colonial control figure: the systems, institutions, and ways of thinking that enacted historical cruelties; the contemporary government policies and practices that continue to oppress and marginalize Indigenous peoples and communities; and the willful neglect that underpins the failure to adequately address issues of poverty, poor housing, and lack of infrastructure within Indigenous communities.

The wittigo's craving for human flesh is about predation: not actually cannibalism, but something like it. Today's wittigo cannibalizes other people's souls through sexual abuse, and it eats away at another person's identity by inflicting emotional abuse. It cannibalizes the strength of communities by engaging in toxic communication patterns: the "backbiting, gossip, criticism, putdowns, personal attacks, sarcasm, and secrets" identified by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation as an everyday impact of the intergenerational cycle of trauma. Today, the wittigo craves alcohol and empty sex to numb the pain and fill the gap created by a lack of love and belonging. The wittigo destroys connection: to others, and to oneself. The wittigo story at the beginning of this chapter is told by the Peskotomuhkati people in present-day Maine and New Brunswick, who call their wittigo figure the chenoo. It is an ancient story, and it illustrates Indigenous concepts of health and healing.

Despite the incorrect assumptions of European anthropologists, killing a wittigo isn't about murdering someone who is mentally ill. Killing a wittigo is about destroying the negative energy that makes an individual feel disconnected, angry, fearful, or sad. It is about destroying the terror that characterizes the everyday life of someone who has survived trauma. It is about destroying the cannibal: the selfish, greedy behaviours of individuals, systems, and institutions that destabilize communities and prioritize individual gain over collective well-being. In the context of intergenerational trauma, killing the wittigo also means unpacking the traumatic story that keeps Indigenous peoples tied to the past and creating a new story of our own choosing.

The Peskotomukhati story illustrates exactly how health and well-being can be restored to the individual and to the community. In the story, the wife chooses to be kind. Kindness is the only way to bring an individual back into the community and the only way to heal a community. It's very simple: people must demonstrate kindness if they want to experience kindness. When kindness becomes a mainstay of daily interpersonal relationships and part of everyday life in a community, then the community becomes a safe place to be. The story also tells us what to expect when we are interacting with people who have experienced trauma. When Chenoo moves his bedding to the door, he is backing away from the symbol of the fire: the centre of the home, which represents the warmth provided by the husband and wife. He is just not ready to accept their kindness and inclusion right away, because he feels vulnerable. This speaks to the idea that healing cannot be accomplished overnight or on any but the survivor's own schedule.

The woman and her husband are ready to show kindness and to include him, but to Chenoo, kindness and inclusion are unfamiliar and therefore threatening. His choice to move farther away from the fire is respected by the husband and wife. When Chenoo makes an attempt to contribute to the life of the community by chopping wood, he makes a mess, retreating afterward to stare at the fire. Chenoo needs time and space to make mistakes and then spend time thinking about those mistakes — and about the way he will do things in the future. For Indigenous peoples, healing describes processes that relate to mind, body, spirit, and emotion.

When Chenoo cannibalizes others, he is taking something that does not belong to him. When he drinks the tallow, he is taking something that has been offered to

him. In Indigenous philosophies, animals offer themselves to humans because humans need them to survive. That is why humans must be thankful and humble and strive toward regulating greed and over-consumption: because the natural world is a gift, a gift that helps us live without having to assume power over others. After he accepts the gift of tallow, Chenoo “vomits up all the horrors and atrocities of the earth.” He is letting go of the unresolved emotions that turn him into a predator, letting go of the traumatic inheritance that fuels the negativity he carries within him. This letting go is a necessary step toward rebuilding his sense of self and his sense of connection to others. Purging is considered part of healing because it changes the makeup of the physical body, restoring the energetic signature (or spirit) of the sick person. After they talk and Chenoo requests his bundle, the wife follows Chenoo’s suggestion and throws away the human legs and feet that are inside. This section of the story is about setting boundaries. When the community sets standards for behaviour, it does so in consultation with its citizens, rather than imposing rules and regulations.

Because his autonomy is honoured, Chenoo does not adopt an inflexible position. Instead, he shows a willingness to understand the needs and values of others. When she retrieves the bundle, the wife does not judge Chenoo’s prior actions — there is no disgust or contempt. She cleans up the bundle while also giving Chenoo the things he needs. This shows how we balance kindness with the boundaries that ensure collective safety. When Chenoo warns his friends that the evil chenoo’s scream will kill them, he speaks about the power of traumatized people to negatively affect the lives of the people around them. In some cases, people might choose to set a boundary of non-engagement to protect their own well-being (as the wife does, when she refuses to eat the meat that Chenoo and her husband bring back from their hunt). In other cases, the community must come running — as the husband does to Chenoo, when Chenoo asks — to assist their fellow citizens in their battle to become whole. Healing is a social process that involves everyone. Part of that process is learning how to assist others and at the same time protect yourself. The story makes reference to the “long and weary work” of killing the evil chenoo because healing is not a straight line from there to here. It is filled with small successes and large failures, with huge gains and a reduction in (but sometimes not elimination of) the behaviours and beliefs that bind the survivor to the traumatic past. When Chenoo lies down in the canoe after seeing the second evil chenoo, he is succumbing to his old fear, even while experiencing the beauty of the lake and the company and assistance of friends.

When he eats the evil chenoo's liver, he forgets the lessons in kindness that the husband and wife are teaching him and slides backward into vengeance and anger. He forgets the lessons he has been shown — such as the husband's small size leading to victory over the evil chenoo — and relies on the familiar tools of vengeance and anger to try to increase his power through artificial means. Eating the evil chenoo's liver does not bring Chenoo back to his self or increase his medicine power. He regains his sense of self through the journey he takes to become whole.

Chenoo is tired at the end of the story because healing is hard work. His mind, body, and spirit have transformed because he has accepted love and can now show love. But now he is like a little child: he has to revisit the stages of development that his past experiences of trauma have prevented him from achieving. When the wife's mother tells him he must fast, this is the final step in rebuilding the self that he should have been at this point in his life. When he fasts, he will meet his spirit helpers and discover who he is and what he has to offer to the community. So, why kill one wittigo (the evil chenoo) and treat the other wittigo (Chenoo) with kindness? Because the evil chenoo is a metaphor for Chenoo's disconnected self, the self that is out of balance. Chenoo must rid himself of that creature in order to regain his well-being, aided by the kindness and assistance of others. Once he regains that well-being, he will become part of the foundation for community wellness. The story describes Chenoo's journey to become human again as a gradual process that involves several different activities and some inadvertent steps backward. This is another teaching provided by the story: that healing is only accomplished by transformation over the long term. Unfortunately, short-term approaches and one-off programs that fit easily into election cycles and funding calendars are the most common method of addressing current challenges within Indigenous communities.

Methot, Suzanne. *Legacy: Trauma, Story, and Indigenous Healing* (pp. 266-278). ECW Press. Kindle Edition.