Boundaries between the Algonquian interactional categories of private and public discourse do not fall in the same places as their ostensible equivalents in mainstream Canadian society. This is one of the reasons that Ojibwe and Cree orators, even when they speak in English, often fail to establish common meanings with audiences of mainstream Canadians. The Algonquian speaker, who is warranted to speak by virtue of having amassed culturally appropriate experience over a lifetime, uses his/her hard-won personal expertise arising from this life experience to teach others. The grounding is particular and biographically unique. Paradoxically, however, the discourse genre is impersonal relative to its opposite number among mainstream Canadian speaking conventions.

Kenneth Burke (1941) coined the term representative anecdote in western literary theory to emphasize that the merely anecdotal could, in fact, stand for a general argument. In the communicative economy which Algonquian speakers carry over into their English discourse, in contrast, the particular personal experience constitutes the critical — the decisive — evidence for the reliability of the generalization. Once made, usually implicitly, through the story/anecdote, the generalization is available for reflection by others in relation to their own experience. An effective teacher/speaker is one who can maximize the shared experience upon which valid self-understanding is necessarily based. The generic, rather than the unique, experience is foregrounded in the interests of maximizing shared semantic space. Old information, which is already shared among interactors, provides the ideal context within which new information is rendered intelligible.

Although these interactional strategies originated within a myriad of small face-to-face communities of known persons across Indian country in what is now Canada, they are now employed in wider communicative contexts among the various First Nations communities and in relation to the Canadian mainstream. Over a decade ago, Noel Dyck retold, from the
shared memory of his close associates, several of the stories of the late Saskatchewan Cree elder John McLeod. Dyck (1986) argued that John’s stories lulled mainstream lecture audiences into seeing from a First Nations point of view, simultaneously leaving listeners to draw for themselves (more strongly than he could possibly have done himself without causing sufficient offense to end the potential dialogue) horrendous morals about the political and human condition of aboriginal peoples in Canada. Deceptively simple stories were deployed strategically to initiate a reflective process in their hearer(s) — a trajectory to a future more tolerant of dramatically different forms of expressing respect for persons and their cultural communities. Somewhere between teller and audience, stories acquire the capacity to become symbols for collective, public experience, Burke’s representative anecdotes.

John McLeod’s method was dialogic, as oral tradition enjoins that teaching/speaking should be. It is a risky method, highly dependent on face-to-face contact and interactive good will — matters fragile and unpredictable at best. Effectiveness of cross-cultural communication can never be taken for granted. The speaker is vulnerable because it is impossible to exert control of the personal autonomy of those who listen, of what they will hear.

First Nations public speakers who use the deceptively simple but highly sophisticated interactional strategies of teaching through stories, in the manner of traditional storytellers, are too often dismissed in mainstream Canadian culture as unable to generalize from their own experience to “the bigger picture”.

Traditional cultures understand this “bigger picture” to be an amalgam of the experiences of many individuals, which is shared through stories — with various features that may strike chords of recognition in some but not all listeners. Respect for one’s hearers enjoins the storyteller to speak from his/her own experience and to leave open the relationship of that experience to the ever-changing understanding of the listener(s). Nothing is ever finished in such an interactional system; its continuity rests on process rather than content, on the absence of closure.

Because the outcome which defines successful communication is open-ended depending on the listener(s) and their experience subsequent to the listening, the skilful storyteller emphasizes experiences that are likely to have been shared, or are accessible to the listeners’ imaginations. The most
valuable information is already known; familiarization makes it possible for public discourse about private experience to stand for, and to constitute the possibility of, effective communication.

Most anthropologists associate these strategies with traditional elders. John McLeod (Dyck 1986), John Tootosis (Goodwill and Sluman 1984), Joseph Dion (1979) and Art Solomon (1990) are among those whose stories have been recorded in such a frame, both orally and in writing. Perhaps less obviously, these well-tested traditional storytelling strategies are also used by relatively young, bi-cultural First Nations politicians. Although such politicians speak often of their dependence on and respect for advice from their elders, the strategies of their speakings employ many features of traditional discourse best exemplified in the teachings of those very elders.

A generation or two ago (about when I started observing First Nations affairs in Alberta), Native political leaders had to switch communicative systems if they wanted to talk to white folks. This is the double bind of the Native politician that Noel Dyck described so elegantly for the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians of the 1970s. Bicultural skills that worked for one audience were offensive to the other; the switching strategies only worked if the audiences could be kept separate, which became increasingly untenable as media accessibility increased and aboriginal issues received more extensive coverage.

In any case, I think something different is happening today. At least some aboriginal leaders in Canada are trying to teach non-Native Canadians to listen in the ways that they teach their own peoples to listen — not because this new audience is Native but because these are appropriate ways for (all) human persons to learn. The message, about the possibility of a more tolerant society, is in the medium — that is, continued reliance on an open-ended story with the interactional properties of oral tradition regardless of its surface form. To be sure, such speakings by aboriginal leaders have significant content. But there is also a search for commonality of experience that lies even more powerfully between the lines. The way public political discourse uses personal experience is itself the message, however consciously or subconsciously traditional strategies are employed in particular instances and however subliminal the audience response.

My admiration for this emergent discourse is boundless. My despair at how often it falls on deaf ears cries out for a making explicit of communicative strategies so deeply buried in cultural socialization and
personal experience that few of us, politicians or citizens, Native or non-Native, question them in the normal course of our experience and mutual interaction.

Possible examples are legion, many of them based on my research with my colleague Lisa Valentine (supported by the Social Science Research Council of Canada over the last six years) on the performance of First Nations identity in English. In line with an ethical commitment to preserve individual anonymity wherever possible, however, I will focus on an example of political discourse using personal biography in exemplary story which is already in the public domain. Nonetheless, the essential parameters of this discourse have become clear as a result of my own fieldwork.

In 1993, Assembly of First Nations National Chief Ovide Mercredi, with the assistance of Cree law professor Mary Ellen Turpel, published a book entitled In the rapids: navigating the future of First Nations. Turpel has woven a narrative frame around pieces from Mercredi’s speeches, attempting to provide continuity and background for readers who are not immersed in the events leading up to and including the failure of the Charlottetown Accord as seen from an aboriginal point of view.

I want to read closely the narrative strategies and metaphors found in a text directed by an aboriginal politician to a non-aboriginal audience not known for its sophisticated interpretive strategies on matters of First Nations history, culture, or aspirations toward self-determination. Key metaphors, many familiar from oral tradition in small communities, appear in capital letters. A linking of the series of metaphors, indeed, provides one way of expressing the particularity of interpretation in terms of unique personal life experience; the richness of metaphor is precisely that it need not be understood the same way by everyone.

Mercredi and Turpel self-consciously call for a new turn in the effort to communicate “what First Nations peoples want” to mainstream Canadians. The “new prominence” of aboriginal issues after the failure of the Charlottetown Accord highlighted the desperate need for BRIDGES (p. 2). The needed non-literal, non-physical bridges are constituted by “empathy and understanding”: “We want all Canadians to know what the situation is from a First Nation’s person’s point of view” (p. 5).

The title metaphor of RAPIDS fits well for a Cree chief who comes from Grand Rapids, Manitoba, but it is not attributed to Mercredi. Rather, the words were spoken to him by a chief when he was among the elders at
Morley, Alberta. The frontispiece quotation from northern Ojibwe elder Sandy Beardy challenges (and instructs) the National Chief through a reported VISION of Canada including the First Nations in the midst of “untravelled” rapids with no map of dangers ahead. It is crucial to see clearly along a difficult path. There cannot be a map because the endpoints are not known. The history being made in First Nations negotiations with Canada and Canadians is outside the past experience of Native people and their leaders; it is also, of course, outside the experience of mainstream Canadian politicians, though they may be less willing to acknowledge this. Nonetheless, Mercredi employs time-tested traditional strategies to new kinds of experiences, on the advice of his traditional teachers. “The elder said” that First Nations people have skills needed by Canada in these “turbulent waters ahead”.

The metaphor of the rapids frames the entire book, the introduction being titled “Entering a great rapids” and the conclusion “Paddling more peaceful waters”. The temporary closure occasioned by the publication of the book is a pause for reflexivity and an optimistic invitation for non-Native Canadians to participate in Mercredi’s vision of a shared future. In troubled waters, it is necessary to move forward. Political action, like life itself, is linear in emergence, though thematic or recurrent in its meaning. The metaphors provide tools for reflecting upon or interpreting the ongoing movement of the river with its characteristic alternation of rapids and lulls.

TURBULENCE is not good for communication. It distorts concentration, replaces consensus with conflict. Mercredi asserts that most Canadians only hear about First Nations issues when there is a crisis; information is mediated through non-Native media (p. 2) and is unlikely to lead to effective communication. Careful reflection outside of the maelstrom (of the rapids) is called for and herein provided. Crises can only produce SNAPSHOTS, artificial stasis in ongoing events; processes toward communication must be fluid and ongoing, including context as well as snapshot (e.g., p. 6). Mercredi’s personal commitment to non-violence keeps the canoe afloat (p. 9). Again, turbulence and conflict do not work.

EQUALITY won’t work as a principle of political organization because the First Nations are a minority whose needs could always be ignored on the basis of a majority vote. Democracy, rather, involves diversity of cultures and ways of living. “Our elders tell us” that “we” — including all Canadians — should “grieve” the “imbalance” in our relationships and the
loss of our rights and freedoms to differ from one another, as communities and individuals (p. 52). BALANCE of diversities is the only just route.

Reliance on the Elders (always emphasized by the upper case) is symbolized by the MEDICINE BUNDLE which Ovide keeps in his Ottawa office so that each elder who visits him can add to its contents. The wisdom for which he becomes a spokesman is collective, arising from the assembled diversities. Turpel suggests that this is a “metaphor” for the contemporary relevance of First Nations values (p. 10). I propose, however, that the current fad for calling everything a metaphor is out of place here. There is substantial literalness to a medicine bundle; as a concrete object, at the very least it is a metonym.

The instructions Mercredi receives are far from abstract. Not long after his election, four of the oldest elders in the Prince Albert (Saskatchewan) Tribal Council presented him with a headdress at a sweatlodge; they “explained” to him “what their expectations were of me as the National Chief” (p. 41). They gave him a white flag to hang at that place and four more to mark, as he travelled, the extents of the First Nations in the four directions. He would know which colours to place where when he got there (wisdom would come from experience?). Again, the sacred symbols unite enormous diversity within a framework of respect; respect is the force of empowerment. That the place of the instruction was taken as the centre parallels the emphasis on the situatedness of personal experience; the four directions extend outward from the position of the self and are interpretable only in relation to it.

As in most traditional First Nations rhetorical conventions, things narrated about often come in FOURS — for example, values to infuse politics: honesty, kindness, sharing, strength. Non-violent resistance has the power to change society through “discipline, courage, conviction and sacrifice” — in political action as in individual life (p. 55). But imbalance produces triadic rhetoric characteristic of the Euro-Canadian, Judeo-Christian interpretive tradition: “respect, dialogue and cooperation” are needed in adversarial situations like Oka; “respect, kindness and justice” break down in crisis (p. 49). Although the pattern is not utterly consistent, it is sufficiently frequent to reinforce the association of Nativeness with balance and effective political and moral action, contrasting with the imbalance of the mainstream Canadian tradition. Characteristically, however, Mercredi’s critique of the mainstream is stated in positive terms
of traditional Native strategies for redressing imbalance.

Personal experience is not claimed in narration as the unique possession of the individual speaking. Rather, the speaker is responsible for his/her words as part of an ongoing passing on of words through oral tradition. Turpel says of Mercredi that it is "not just the words of one man at one point in history but the words of the many generations that have passed along the knowledge, ideas and values that have influenced and structured his voice as one Cree person" (p. 11).

Mercredi's claim to authority to speak about the condition of First Nations persons and communities comes from his TRAVELLING. He often begins a story with "throughout my travels..." (p. 15). We may recall that the culture hero/trickster Wisahketchak was always walking when things happened to him (producing the present state of the world, and the stories whereby Cree persons learn about the world). These sacred stories provide an interpretive, narrative template for contemporary political experience. Native listeners appreciate that things happen while one travels and that those things that happen will be reported in stories.

Mercredi maintains the pace of his travelling through the help of the elders. "VISITING our people" is important to tell him "what our collective voice should say" (p. 148). Moreover, he wants to "witness first-hand how our people live across the country" (p. 149) so that he can speak from first-hand experience; he claims the various peoples as his own but does not take for granted that he knows how they live. He asks the CHILDREN for advice and finds their suggestions to listen to your mother, do your homework and not fight "consistent with what the Elders tell us" (p. 149). The children and the elders, together, stand for the continuity of the generations in an oral tradition. Mercredi's job is stay in touch with both ends of this chain of cultural transmission.

There are many passages in which the diversity of aboriginal traditions is catalogued. Usually the examples begin with "the people of my origin, the Crees..." (p. 16). Mercredi speaks most directly and authoritatively about the tradition which belongs to him, of the others by empathy and listening during his travels. Inalienable possession applies to experience as well as grammatical categories.

Groundedness in PLACE is crucial. "We cannot tell a story of somewhere else; we are this place" (p. 19). Mercredi argues that the questions people ask him about what he has learned in his travels can only
be answered through the history of First Nations communities. Among the widely shared experiences with contemporary repercussions, RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS are a particular bane, “in my case in The Pas, Manitoba” (p. 19). Mercredi is able to speak about residential schools because he attended one. Although not everyone had the same experience of residential school, experience is the basis of talking about and understanding the different experiences.

It is the “tenacity” of the elders that makes it possible to survive and revitalize the “intact” traditions (p. 19). Elders’ knowledge is still there to be used again when the peoples are ready to listen again. Learning is an ongoing process, even for Mercredi (p. 25): “For me, I continue to learn what it means to be Cree because there is so much history to sort through... to find a personal balance.” By implication, the history is different relative to the situated position of each individual. As a child Mercredi learned from the church to “erase that part of who I am, and who we are collectively.” They took away “our voices”. We are now speaking about more than this man’s personal experience, though that experience is also his authorization to speak more broadly.

He continues: “I believe this is the common experience of all First Nations peoples.” Mercredi is always careful to use the plural “peoples”. He does not overgeneralize. Yet this sentence contains the unqualified “all”. These are the conclusions — the points where individual experience and collective wisdom reinforce one another. The inevitability of the conclusion transcends qualification.

Mercredi explores the nature of oral tradition in relation to the breaking of treaty promises; “we have witnessed” 200 years of broken promises; the witnessing, the experiential base, is not in personal experience but in uninterrupted transmission through oral tradition. BROKEN is the inevitable adjective modifying promises. When Mercredi attended the Treaty Six payment at Frog Lake, the sacred treaty pipestem used in 1876 was taken out and found to be “broken in half”. Mercredi does not know how it came to be broken, but “I do know how the treaties were broken” (p. 76). This movement from metonym to metaphor is probably unintelligible to most mainstream Canadian readers. Collective experience teaches Mercredi about the treaties, about history. The brokenness of the pipe, however, is implicitly interpreted as part of the capacity of the sacred to insure its own respect. Mercredi cannot speak for or about the power inherent in the pipe.
“We also have an understanding of these treaties... no less valid simply because it is oral” (p. 65). For the First Nations, the treaties exist outside time, unchanged. Canada’s “reluctance” to honour them stems from “government policies” (which can be changed), not from anything inherent in the treaties themselves (p. 66). The Canadian position is neither natural nor inevitable; it is socially constructed. There is nothing negotiable about the present breach of trust: “No one can say there is any ambiguity” in the treaties; “No First Nations person consented...” (p. 66). These harsh and unqualified judgments are rhetorically unusual and therefore more powerful in contrast to the basic narrative strategy in which statements are mitigated by point of view and experience.

The political process whereby the treaties can be mended has all the usual qualifications on abstract truth. Because “we have diverse opinions on treaties”, changes must “accommodate the different approaches of our peoples” (p. 66). This is the exclusive “we” — which Mercredi does not use often. As an example, Mercredi describes his own understanding of the treaties. He understands “the history” of Treaty Six from books and Treaty Five “from living it” in his own home country (p. 69). Visiting Natives in prison, he recalls pictures of Big Bear and Poundmaker who were also jailed, as political prisoners. History recapitulates itself in contemporary experience.

In a powerful understatement, Mercredi suggests not only that White men have attempted to steal the history of the First Nations but that: “Taking a piece of anyone’s history... is not an act of respect” (p. 72–73). When he travels, Mercredi carries the medicine bundle from his office “as an important lesson in history”. Big Bear’s medicine bundle, in contrast, now resides in an American museum where it can no longer be used. But it is “not an historical artifact; it is a living and very vibrant aspect of our culture” (p. 72). Stories and objects which stand for them constitute the historiography of the First Nations; they reinforce one another’s lessons.

Realizing that First Nations treaty commentaries are often dismissed by mainstream Canadians as flowery rhetoric irrelevant to Machiavellian politics, Mercredi insists that his own treaty, the one he lives because it continues to structure his everyday experience, does not say what his people were told it said. “Our oral understanding ... is that we agreed to share the lands” (p. 78). The commissioners were there for only three hours and argued that all the land was surrendered; “it is difficult for me
to believe" (p. 77). Mercredi’s personal belief is of crucial relevance to the legitimacy of the treaty. It is not a document with closure from peoples’ experiences.

"Even the literal meaning of the written text has not been respected" (p. 7); for this, of course, there can be no excuse. Beyond the literal truth visible even to the treaty commissioners and the politicians behind them, however, “our understandings of our treaties have never become part of Canadian law” (p. 74). Again, the “our” is exclusive — the aboriginal point of view has not been known or respected. The treaties belong to both parties who signed them. It is important now for First Nations peoples “to be able to tell our stories about what the treaties mean; our oral histories about the treaty negotiations are as valid as the documents” (p. 74). I would want to say that they ARE documents, albeit not the written ones privileged by the Euro-Canadian tradition.

PRONOUNS vary non-randomly between personal experience and its applicability to the collectivity, for example “We [all of us, at least all First Nations peoples] need to find...” “For me [a particular individual of limited but legitimate experience], the Cree ways... will enable our [all First Nations — this is the point where conclusion is justified by specificity of experience and generalization related to it] children” (p. 26).

Mercredi is not JUDGEMENTAL. After 500 years of “imbalance” it is necessary to find “a harmony and a balance” (p. 29). There is not a single way to do this, judged in advance. Nor is any one person responsible for the imbalance. The indefinite pronoun makes it clear that many ways may contribute to solution.

Mercredi does not blame Euro-Canadians for today’s messes. He does distance himself, however, from their ancestors. “They came... We taught...” (p. 29) — “they” are not part of “us”. The implication that Euro-Canadians have failed to take up the teachings offered to them is not made explicit. Mercredi suggests that Canada is “a good idea” but “still incomplete” (p. 32). He frequently speaks of Canada as though he/she (Algonquian animate) were a person.

Elsewhere, Canada is reduced to the singularities of the person of (then Prime Minister) Pierre Trudeau: “After ten years with your venerated Charter of Rights and Freedoms...” (p. 220), Trudeau may be better off but First Nations peoples are not. The Charter belongs to Trudeau alone — there is no “we” or “our” here. First Nations peoples must “speak for
ourselves” because they are not part of the “Canadian heritage” (p. 36).

This Canadian system “has not improved the rights of my peoples” (p. 105), who are, after all, not Canadians. Characteristically, differentiation is greater among First Nations peoples: “against my people... we want... our identities” (p. 33). Mercredi’s rendition of the two-row wampum as “a co-living agreement” (p. 35) is not complete either. It is in this sense of ongoing striving for balance that Canada remains incomplete.

Mercredi is afraid that Canadian and First Nations attitudes are “hardening” (p. 244) — making real communication decreasingly likely. He longs to “teach” the premier of Quebec that “No one owns the word ‘distinct’” (p. 175) and reports his “shock” at the absence of a “natural alliance” because the goals of change are so similar for Quebec and the First Nations (p. 166). Absolute sovereignty is impossible because everywhere in the world “we live in an era of interdependence” (p. 154). This “we” is all of us except those who have closed their minds to interdependence — it is potentially an inclusive reference, with each reader having the choice of where he/she will stand.

Mercredi did not begin with the idea that he would “become the national preacher.” But his “optimism” led him to use his own experience to persuade others, both Native and non-Native, that experience might lead to OPTIMISM (p. 145): “But I think it’s important to pour out my feelings so that people will have an idea what I think, who I am, and how I believe we can work together to heal our people.” The genre of harangue is thoroughly traditional; it means to counsel, lecture, speak to others, particularly children, on the basis of experience, about what they should do.

At some times, Mercredi’s optimism is severely challenged. “People of my generation” seek changes which will likely be invisible “until the next generation comes to power” (p.144). To keep going means to believe that Canadians will help the First Nations, respond to this plea for effective communication.

Even the leaders are torn by the conflicts of assimilation and lack of integration into Canadian society. “We cannot be comfortable with this” (p. 113): “You can see this in the way we relate to each other as human beings, and in the way we must conduct ourselves as leaders” — “you” is the reader who is exhorted toward change, toward acting in accordance with the needs and wishes of the First Nations. “We are having trouble maintaining our sense of community” — there is imbalance because of
European-style individualism and it must be resolved among Native people in terms of their relationships to one another (p. 114).

There is dissention among the First Nations communities, in part reflecting the diversities of their experiences. Mercredi breaks down the unanimity of the First Nations voices, respecting the differences and refusing to define them as cacophonous: “Some of our people...” “Some people...” “But I believe...” (p. 91). But they are still claimed as “our” people and Mercredi cites his own experience and belief to persuade rather than to silence. First Nations political will, in contrast, is unanimous: “We design our own institutions [though they are locally diverse] and rely on our own values” rather than “someone else’s program” (p. 95). “Someone else” here is distancing and hardened into rigidity. Local knowledge and local agency are opposed to mainstream imposition of false homogeneity on the First Nations, indeed on society generally.

Mercredi knows what “exclusion feels like” because he received C-31 status (as a result of changes to the Indian Act in 1985) just before he became National Chief, “although I would never define myself in that humiliating way” (p. 87). That his mother married a Métis trapper [thereby losing treaty Indian status for herself and her children] had nothing to do with his own identity and upbringing or with the continued exclusion of his own daughter from status. “I am a Cree. That is how I was raised, that is who I am, and I will never let that federal Act define me. We must resist its humiliating categories” (p. 87). His parents made him “what I am: a Cree man” (p. 46). Being Cree, being a First Nations person, is a judgment about one’s own experience-based sense of identity and the relationship of that self to a First Nations community. Humiliation is losing the right to say for oneself and for one’s children who one is.

Like John McLeod, Ovide Mercredi presumes to speak because of his experiences — of life under the Indian Act and of the contemporary diversity of the First Nations peoples through his travelling on their behalf. It is proper use of this experience to highlight what is wrong and what is needed. There is a fine line between boasting, putting oneself above others, and exercising designated authority on behalf of others. Humility is the proper presentation of self. The politician who speaks for others has an obligation of respect to listen in return, both to voices from his own constituency and from the larger society. To establish a two-way conversa-
tion rather than a monologue or a sermon is the real issue behind this collaboration of Mercredi and Turpel.

Mercredi speaks to mainstream Canada, urging the initiation of such a conversation, when he claims that neither way is better. "Who is to say..." (p. 102) implies that no one can have experience to do so; thus the pronoun remains vague, unidentified, uncharacteristic in Mercredi's prose. He addresses the same message of equal validity of differences to his own peoples. "I have lived in both societies. I understand both ways, and ours is not inferior or undemocratic" (p. 104). Exhortation to effective communication must come from both sides. Ironically, Mercredi applies a narrative strategy from his own tradition when he says that both traditions are worthy of respect. It is a plea to join the First Nations in the rapids and go beyond the safety of monologue by a powerful majority addressed only to itself. Whether that challenge will be taken up depends in good part on the ability to listen to public discourse such as Mercredi's in terms of the way it builds on personal experience to frame political action and cross-cultural conversation.

REFERENCES