

13 Raven Rising: A Matriarch Is Born

Ashton Harry (T̂si'danas Xiyalh)

Sid soughzi T̂si'danas Xiyalh. T̂silhqot'in deni neslin. Tl'etinqox desni. Se inkwel Eleanor Cooper. Se etsu Victorine Stump xinli. Se etsu Julia Elkins-Stump xinli. Se etsi Francis William Xini Xeni Gwet'in desni. Se etsi Myles Pigeon Xinli.

My traditional name is "The one who moves forward in a good way" (T̂si'danas Xiyalh). My government name is Ashton Harry. I am T̂silhqot'in (Chilcotin) and I am from Tl'etinqox (Anaham Reserve). My mother is Eleanor Cooper. My grandmother was the late Victorine Stump; my great-grandmother was the late Julia Elkins-Stump. My maternal grandfather was the late Francis William of Xeni Gwet'in. However, I was raised by my step-grandfather, the late Myles Pigeon.

I was raised traditionally. I grew up in a home surrounded by my cousins, aunts, uncles, my mother, and my grandparents. My grandparents carried much of the responsibility of raising us, and because of that, I was given a strong foundation. I was spoken to in T̂silhqot'in and fully immersed in our culture from a young age.

I was blessed to have grandparents who were intentional about my learning. They made sure I received a strong T̂silhqot'in education while also reinforcing the importance of Western education. They understood that I would need both to walk in this world.

Long before I understood what leadership was, they were already teaching me how to lead. Looking back now, I see that they were raising me with the same patience and intention that Raven carries in our stories. They were preparing me, even when I did not yet understand what I was being prepared for.

Many of the lessons they shared about what it means to be T̂silhqot'in became the foundation of my values as a leader. My grandmother taught me the importance of respect. Respect is not just a value; it is a way of being. It shapes how we treat others, how we carry ourselves, and how we move through the world. We are taught to treat others as we wish to be treated, and that teaching has stayed with me in every space I enter.

My grandfather also taught me respect, but in a different way. He taught me through action. I learned it while hunting, fishing, and picking berries. I learned it in how we take only what we need and give thanks for what is provided. I also saw it in how he treated my grandmother. She was respected and upheld in our home. She was the decision maker, the one we looked to. Before I ever knew the word "matriarch," I understood what it meant.

Those teachings became my foundation. They are what I return to when I need guidance. They are what keep me grounded as I continue rising into the leader I am meant to be.

Why Leadership Is Critical Now

Leadership is instilled in T̓silhqot'in̓ esqax (children) from a very early age through storytelling. Our teachings come through stories of datsan chugh (Raven), whose journeys carry lessons that guide how we live and lead.

The story that has influenced my leadership the most is "Raven Stole the Sun." In this story, Raven witnesses a group of people hoarding the light of the sun, keeping it hidden away in a box. The world is left in darkness. It is cold, nothing grows, and people are struggling to survive. Raven cannot understand why something so essential would be kept from others.

Instead of reacting right away, Raven waits. He watches. He is patient.

When the time is right, he transforms himself into a pine needle and places himself in the path of the chief's daughter. She unknowingly swallows him while drinking from the creek, and Raven is eventually born into the family. Even then, he waits. As a child, he cries endlessly until the chief, exhausted, gives him the box that holds the sun. Raven returns to it again and again, learning, waiting for the moment when he can act.

And when that moment comes, he rises.

Raven transforms back, takes the sun, and escapes through the smoke hole of the pit house. He is chased, but he cannot be caught. He releases the sun into the sky, bringing light back to the world. In doing so, he is burned. His once-white feathers turned black.

That part of the story has always stayed with me.

Raven did not leave unchanged. Bringing light into the world required sacrifice. It marked him. It transformed him.

This story teaches patience, selflessness, and the importance of acting for the greater good, even when there is a cost to yourself. It reminds me that leadership is not always comfortable, and it is not always celebrated. Sometimes it asks you to give parts of yourself so that others can live in a better way.

These are not just stories we hear. They are teachings we are expected to live.

I was raised understanding that the decisions we make today will impact the next seven generations. That we carry a responsibility to think beyond ourselves. That short-term gain is not worth long-term harm.

I was also raised with a simple but powerful teaching—the world does not owe me anything; I owe something to the world.

And in my own way, through every role I have stepped into, every space I have challenged, and every path I have chosen, I am learning what it means to rise, just like Raven did.

Values in Leadership Practice

When I reflect on the story of Raven and how it mirrors my leadership, I am always brought back to the teaching of patience. Raven waited, observed, and moved with intention. His story reminds me that not everything is meant to happen quickly, and not everything is meant to happen on our timeline.

I have known since I was a little girl that I was meant for something bigger than myself. I knew early on that my path would lead me toward becoming Chief of my community. Since 2016, I have run in every election. I have not yet been elected Chief, but I did earn a seat at the leadership table for two terms as a member of Council. Over time, I came to understand that Council was not where I was meant to stay. It did not allow the kind of change I feel called to make.

What I once saw as a loss, I now see as redirection.

I have been fortunate to find another path, one that allows me to contribute to meaningful change while I wait for my community to be ready for my leadership. That path led me to advocating for children and families. When I was a young student in college, a Medicine Man once told me I was meant to be a social worker. I scoffed because I did not believe him. He told me my path would be hard until I accepted what I was meant to do, which was to help children and families.

Looking back now, I understand. Nothing in my life has come easy, but I no longer see that as a burden. I see it as preparation. Every challenge shaped me, softened me, and strengthened my understanding of the work I am here to do.

During my time in the Master of Arts in Leadership – Executive Leadership Specialization (MAL XL) program, I learned more about myself as a leader than I ever expected. I realized that many of the things I was being taught were already rooted in me. They came from my upbringing, from my grandparents, and from my culture. I did not have the language for “values-based leadership,” but I was already living it.

My grandparents taught me respect in everything—respect for people, for animals, and for Mother Earth. That value continues to guide me. Honesty is another value I carry deeply; it is also rooted in being raised by Elders. At the same time, I grew up witnessing leadership in my community that lacked honesty, integrity, and accountability. That contrast has shaped me. It showed me clearly the kind of leader I did not want to be, and the kind of leader I needed to become.

Key Practices for Executive Leadership

My story is one of perseverance. It is a story of resilience, strength, and transformation.

At the beginning of my journey, I was already grounded in my values. I lived them, spoke about them, and shared them with others. What the MAL XL program gave me was confirmation. It showed me that I was already those things, and that I could be even more.

The most important value I grew into was compassion.

Like many Indigenous families, mine was impacted by the Residential School and Indian Day School systems. We were not taught that tears were healing. We were taught they were something to hide. Even with that history, I was blessed. By the time I came into my grandparents' lives, they had become soft in ways that allowed them to teach with love and grace. Everything I understand about leadership and about becoming a matriarch comes from them.

The MAL XL program taught me that being a strong leader does not mean being hardened. It means being open. It means being willing to sit in discomfort and still choose growth.

Some moments in my life could have taken me out at the knees. Moments that once would have broken me. Instead, I stood back up.

I lost my job, not because I failed, but because I became too much for a system that was not ready for me. I spoke up. I challenged decisions that did not serve my people. I questioned systems built on colonial values. I pushed for change where change was needed.

At the time, it felt like loss. Now, I understand it as alignment. There is redirection in rejection.

That experience pushed me onto the path I was always meant to walk. I allowed myself to grieve, but I also leaned into my culture for strength. I thought often about Raven. In some tellings, Raven sacrificed himself to bring light to the people. He refused to accept a world where something so essential was being withheld.

That teaching has stayed with me.

I realized that sharing my voice, even when it made others uncomfortable, was part of my responsibility; it is a part of becoming a matriarch. If that made me "too much," then those were not spaces meant for me. I no longer shrink myself to fit into places that cannot hold me.

Being an Indigenous woman in leadership comes with layers. Being outspoken, honest, and grounded in integrity can be seen as threatening in systems that still uphold colonial and patriarchal values. The lateral violence that Indigenous women face in these spaces is real. It is heavy. But it has also taught me how to stand firmly in who I am without seeking validation from spaces that were never built for me.

I kept moving forward.

I trusted that there was something more waiting for me, even when I could not yet see it. During that time, I started my own consulting business. For the first time in a long time, I felt aligned with my work. I was valued. I was heard. I was appreciated. That experience reminded me that the right spaces will recognize your worth without you having to fight for it.

Then life brought me somewhere I never expected.

I became a social worker.

The opportunity kept appearing, and eventually I listened. I asked for a sign. I asked my grandparents and the universe to show me clearly if this was where I was meant to be. I asked to see a hummingbird.

Hummingbirds were my grandmother's favourite. Since her passing, they have always been a sign that she is with me.

My answer did not come in the way I expected. It came through a story I read the day after I accepted my new position.

A forest was on fire, and all the animals were running away. A jaguar noticed a hummingbird flying toward the fire again and again. When he asked what the hummingbird was doing, the hummingbird said he was carrying water from the lake in his beak to help put out the fire. The jaguar laughed, telling him it would never be enough. The hummingbird replied, "I know, but I am doing what I can. This is my home, and I love my home."

The forest spirits heard him. They were moved by his love and his effort, and they sent a torrential downpour to extinguish the fire.

That story grounded me.

It reminded me that my role is not to carry everything. My role is to do what I can, with what I have, from a place of love. No matter where I am, no matter what role I hold, I am still walking in my purpose.

And that is enough.

How a Master's Degree in Executive Leadership Enhances Professional Practice

When I decided to apply to the MAL XL program at Royal Roads, I was searching for something more in my life. At the time, I was already working as an executive director in my community and serving as a member of the Chief and Council. On paper, I was doing well, but I could feel there was another layer of growth waiting for me.

I explored several programs and applied to two of my top choices. In the end, I left the decision up to the universe.

I was accepted into Royal Roads University's first cohort of the MAL XL in 2021.

At the time, I was looking for something that could fit into my already busy life. I genuinely believed a leadership program would come naturally to me. I thought it would be manageable, maybe even easy.

I could not have been more wrong.

This program challenged me in ways I did not expect. It pushed me beyond what I thought my limits were. There were moments where the pressure of deadlines, papers, and my final project felt heavier than the pressures I experienced while serving on Council, and that is saying a lot. I remember feeling overwhelmed, stretched thin, and at times questioning whether I could keep going.

But those moments were also where the real work happened.

The program asked me to take a deeper look at myself, not just as a leader, but as a person. It challenged my values, strengthened the ones I already carried, and helped me grow into new ones. It showed me that leadership is not just about what you do, but how you show up, especially when things feel difficult.

Looking back now, I can smile at how naive I was. I truly thought I could move through this program with ease. I thought, “It’s leadership, how hard could it be?” The truth is, it was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It was also one of the most important. I do not regret it for a second.

Helpful Resources and Recommended Readings

I recommend the following books:

- *The Let Them Theory* by Mel and Sawyer Robbins (2024)
- *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown (2018)
- *Decolonizing Trauma Work* by Renee Linklater (2014)
- *The Power of Vulnerability* by Brené Brown (2010)
- *Calling My Spirit Back* by Elaine Alec (2021)

There is an obvious theme here in the books I chose to recommend. All are rooted in the intersection of healing, truth-telling, and courageous leadership. Each of these books is grounded in reclaiming yourself in order to lead others.

Closing Thoughts

This is my message to you, the one who chose to read my story: No matter how small you may feel in this world, what you do matters. The work you carry, the love you give, and the way you show up all ripple further than you will ever fully see. The world is not changed by one grand act, but by many small, intentional acts of love.

There will be times when you feel unappreciated, laughed at, or made to believe you are insignificant. In those moments, remember this. Someone hears you. Someone sees you. Someone is impacted by you in ways you may never know.

We need leaders who are grounded in values. Leaders who are willing to walk a different path, even when it is uncomfortable. Leaders who choose truth, integrity, and care for others over fitting into systems that were never built for them.

Raven did not wait for permission. He moved when the time was right, and he gave what he could so that others could have light.

This is what it means to rise.

Raven Rising is not just my story. It is a reminder that even in the smallest actions, there is power. Even in the hardest moments, there is purpose. When the path feels uncertain, you are still becoming exactly who you are meant to be.

Keep going. The world needs your light.

Leader Biography

Ashton Harry (T̓s̓i’danas Xiyalh) is a T̓s̓ilhqot’in leader, advocate, and social work practitioner dedicated to decolonizing systems and advancing Indigenous-led approaches to children in care. She is currently the Family Preservation Manager for her Nation’s Delegated Agency. She has held leadership roles supporting families and communities through culturally grounded practices, including facilitating family-centred decision-making processes and developing holistic safety planning frameworks. Ashton’s work integrates traditional knowledge with

professional practice, emphasizing accountability, relationality, and collective healing. Ashton created the very first Indigenous Care Plan in existence, the T̓silhqot̓in Nanestsen Plan, replacing the MCFD Care Plan. Ashton now dedicates much of her time to teaching other communities and Nations across Canada how to create their own, using hers as a template. With a background in social work and community leadership, Ashton is recognized for her strong advocacy and ability to guide meaningful change. Her leadership reflects a deep commitment to uplifting voices, strengthening families, and advancing Indigenous resurgence.

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