



Taiaiake

<https://taiaiake.net/2017/02/28/the-great-unlearning/>

MENU

FEBRUARY 28, 2017 / 3 COMMENTS

The Great Unlearning

From the start, Newcomers to this continent have thought of the Original People as a problem – The Indian Problem. Our problematic presence is deeply embedded in the collective settler consciousness and the ancient attitude is a constant and consistent trope in literature and academics. You also know that we are failures when it comes to adapting to the natural reality of the development of a modern society, don't you? Lately though, some Canadians have started to question The Indian Problem's place at the core of the country's identity and agenda. I think of this as the silver lining to climate change; not everyone is convinced that progress is good anymore, and some are even starting to question the whole idea of Western culture and capitalism.

There is suspicion about as to whether or not countries like Canada represent the apex of human civilization, and there may have been some terrible trade-offs and problems with the way that these societies have been constructed. One of the emerging realizations that comes from thinking through history in a different way and thinking through the problems that are besetting our communities is that people all across the land are beginning to recognize that there is some form of responsibility for transforming the governing institutions and the fundamental relationships in the society. In a sense, people are starting realize the effects of industrial contamination on people's lives everywhere, and of climate change. Soon people will come to understand that Canada doesn't have an Indian Problem, it has a Colonizer Problem, and that it may be that the way to a better future is not necessarily focusing effort on redefining and removing Indigenous people from the land so that corporations can exploit its "resources" for the settler population's enrichment. They are starting to see that the country's roots as a colonizing enterprise has created a pattern and structure to the relationships between all people and between people and the land in this country that is ultimately destructive to everyone and everything involved.

The Colonizer Problem is the fact that Canada is built on the assumption of a perpetual re-colonization of people and land that allows settler society to enjoy the privileges and the prosperity that are the inheritance of conquest. So what is the fundamental problem of justice and injustice in Canada? Seen from this angle, it's certainly not that we have failed to keep up. It's not even a problem of social justice demanding a rights and recognition discourse to elevate us to the same status of material wellbeing as the mainstream of society. Social justice is a conception and objective is not enough, because if we just focus on that we're looking at just the symptoms, if we're not looking at the fundamental problem, which is the dispossession, the continual occupation, the separation of people from their homelands and the fundamental essence of who they are, we have a massive engine generating social, cultural and physic discord; and not only among the perceived victims but among the imagined beneficiaries of dispossession too. The engine is hot and humming and producing social discord, health harms, and environmental destruction at a never before seen pace.

There is a basic connection between the dispossession and abuse of Indigenous peoples and the structure and effective functioning of the Canadian economy. From where we stand today, in the middle of a Colonizer Problem, fixing the economy, addressing climate change, and respecting the earth all require the achievement of a just relationship with the nations of Original People and manifest respect for the worldview at the base of their cultures. Tinkering with or reforming existing institutions and relationships are useless. What we need is a fundamental shift away from a conquest mentality to a frame of mind that places human beings in real and lasting relationships with each other and the natural environment. This is a psychic change is a ways away for people in the mainstream, though there are some early adopters beginning to engage and the ideational reframing of relationships in this country and for whom an Indigenous environmental ethic offers an alternative way of thinking and being on the land. But what is the Indigenous environmental ethic?

It's all about the land, for us. In the Mohawk language you say, Konnoronkwa Iekeni'stenha ohontsa, "I love my mother the earth". Being Indigenous means having that kind of intimate relationship with the earth, that sense of deep relationship and responsibility to the earth; it means living that relationship, having that connection, fulfilling your responsibility, taking the loving sustenance, taking the sacred knowledge and giving back, loving, and protecting your mother. This is why colonization, which is predicated on the denial of our ability to live out the ethic of universal relation and responsibility is so destructive and demoralizing. Disconnection from the land is more than just an economic deprivation. Disconnection from the land is more than just the political injustice of territorial alienation. Disconnected from the land, we cannot be Indigenous. To be Indigenous you have to live out the Original Instructions and honor your basic responsibilities to your family, to yourself, to other people, and to the other nations of trees, of animals and fish and insects and the waters and winds... all of which speak to it is to exist in a peaceful good way as a human being in this land. Living out this environmental ethic is essential for freedom, health, happiness and justice to be realized in the life of an Indigenous person.

What about reconciliation, some may ask – aren't we in a new era of respect for Original Peoples? The Prime Minister did stand up in the House of Commons and read an apology to the victims of residential school abuses. It was a great mistake, it was entirely unacceptable, it was wrong for us to take those children from their families and to allow them to be abused in schools by the people who ran those schools, we should never have allowed those children to be abused, he said. But this was not the start of a true reconciliation. In turning the page on history by admitting what happened in those schools, the Prime Minister did not talk about the the multi-generational effects of that phase of history. Is the harm of residential school that a grandmother suffered abuse and was not allowed to speak her language and grew up despising her Indianness after that and moved to Brooklyn and called herself Irish? (this is a true story from my family) Is that the harm? Of course it is. But you would have to have a very narrow perspective – Harperian – to argue that there's also not harm as a result of residential school from the grandchild not speaking Mohawk, in fact that the grandchild lives in Brooklyn and not in Kahnawake where the grandmother was born and where her ancestors were born. What was the real intent of residential schools? The intent of residential schools was to break the connection of Native people to their land. They were put in place to remove children from their families and their cultures so that next generation would not know the land, would not be present on the land, and so they would not have the ability to take in the knowledge and the language to be able to defend that land, politically, culturally and physically from the intentions of the people who wanted to come and use that land. That was the intent of residential school. After residential schools, there was barely anyone left to defend the land spiritually and physically. So reconciliation is actually recolonization because it is all about consolidating the territorial gains of previous generations of settler crimes, and it has nothing to do with transformation or even change.

I think the proper targets are the powerful institutions of the Canadian Government on one hand and our own people. We need to define for ourselves what this movement is and this movement should be a movement back to the land. I'm not meaning to seem like a complete romantic here who's a total

dreamer saying, back to the land in terms of let's all turn away from the city and go live out on to the territory. That's not even possible unfortunately in most of our territories because the destruction that's occurred to the environment, the loss of animals and so forth. What I'm talking about is that we need to recover the ability to have a relationship with our land that can sustain us spiritually, culturally and economically in partnership with the society that came here and promised to do that from the beginning. There is a thing called the Kuswentha in my language, which is the Two Row Wampum. Kuswentha means the Wampum Belt and it's a very potent symbol in Canada and in the United States. Because what it does is it represents in very stark terms, in very clear terms and it is the oldest agreement between indigenous nations and newcomer peoples that's continually in existence. But it represents very clearly the vision of native peoples as they bring it to the struggle to redefine the relationship away from colonisation to de-colonisation. I'll just tell you about it.

The Two Row Wampum is a very simple principle. There's a belt that represents an acknowledgement of the fact that we share an existence. The metaphorical languages of a river, the river of time, we're travelling the river of time together. Right there you have a concession on the part of the native people to the new reality. A lot of people say the vision of the traditionalist is so radical as it's impossible to conceptualise. What is it that you want? You want us all to go back to Europe, you want us to do this, that. Well no, actually the foundation of the indigenous perspective is of a co-existence. A peaceful co-existence which was the very thing that allowed these societies to develop in the first place in Canada and the United States.

Canada and the United States were built on this here which was a commitment on the part of each other to honour our co-existence going down to the river of time. Honesty, peace and friendship, three beads in between, honesty, peace and friendship. If you have friendship as your intent, if you are peaceful in your conduct and if your words are honest for all time, the canoe of the native person and the ship of the white person will travel together. Our autonomy and our interdependence will be respected and will have what this white belt represents which is peace. Peace and prosperity together. If this belt is lived out this way forever, will we travel.

At no point does it start to bend slightly to the point where in 2010 the existence of the canoe is now under the existence of the ship. That's an injustice. At no point does it become the One Row Wampum where the sovereignty of the Canadian State supersedes the sovereignty of the Mohawk Nation for example. Very, very clear and very simple, respect for autonomy, yeah, look at our interdependence and acknowledge that we rely on each other. If we're going to have happy, healthy prosperity in our country, we need to live it by this nation to nation principle called the Two Row Wampum. That's what native people are fighting for. This is the expression of it in a Haudenosaunee culture.

But I have the honour of teaching in a territory that's very far from my own. It's my wife's area of the country in British Columbia. I travel all over the place like many of you do. I talk to native people all over and although the manifestation of it may be different in cultural terms, the principle is the same. People did not surrender when they saw white people and white people came. Contrary to what people think people were embraced in our area of the world. People were embraced and they were given a seat, they were told that now you can share in what we have. But if you're going to do that you have to abide by these principles. Unfortunately the fact of our history in North America is that the European peoples abided by these principles until they didn't have to anymore.

Until the population demographic shifted, until the military balance of power shifted and until things were such that people could throw this on the ground and say, now we have not the Two Row Wampum, we have the Indian Act and what are you going to do about it? That's the callousness with which history and the commitments that we had that went into the founding of the country called Canada were thrown away. So when we're talking about a new struggle called the Indigenous Nationhood Movement we're talking about reconnecting back to this original belt which is something that shouldn't be seen as so radical for a people whose ancestors made commitments explicitly to this belt. It's not radical at all, it's actually a restoration and a resurgence of an original way of being, not just

for natives but for the settler society as well.

That's what this Indigenous Nationhood Movement is doing, it's taking the energy of Idle No More, it's taking the frustration of the younger generation of people, it's reforming it and developing a way of articulating it. We're calling it Indigenous Resurgence and then we're trying to develop it into a political movement called the Indigenous Nationhood Movement but it's a very old movement. It's the oldest movement on the continent because Indigenous Nationhood, that's what this is, it's the Two Row Wampum. Everybody here as we say in Canada – if I was talking in Canada – would be a treaty person. We're all treaty people. Treaties are not just for natives. You can have a treaty with yourself. If we're all treaty people, if we have treaties, we made treaties with other people and that means Canada and that means the nations of people who came afterward.

So that's the vision of de-colonisation that's playing itself out in Canada today. I sense there's some parallels and some similarities to things that are happening here in Australia and hope to have a long relationship with my friends and the people here as I do already. To continue to learn and share and actually to develop solidarity, not only with my indigenous brothers and sisters but with the non-indigenous people here because I'll leave you with the final thought which has always been a commitment of our people. Is that the philosophy and the ideas that go into indigenous nation from our perspective are not just things that are going to save us from colonisation, they are actually necessities to save the world from the impulses and the imperatives of capitalist development that happens in a framework without an ethical frame and without a set of principles that talks about sustainability and it puts limits on the idea of growth and exploitation. That's always been a part of this as well, how to live sustainably in an environment. Not to block out realities, not to deny that change happens and time is moving on but to work through it together to develop a relationship, not only with each other that is sustainable but with the other nations of animals and plants and the earth so that you can have [Skennen] which is peace and that you can have a reality that we can be proud to pass on to all of our children, native and non-native in this country.

The Great Unlearning