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A Transformative Framework for Decolonizing Canada: A Non-Indigenous Approach

This evening I will talk about the impetus behind developing this framework to explore the role and responsibility of non-indigenous people – the Canadian public - in decolonization. I begin by telling you about a conference dialogue, and the writings of two indigenous thinkers and activists.

At an academic conference on democratic constitutionalism, Anishinabek scholar John Borrows told a story about family, rather than presenting an academic paper, as his contribution to a panel discussing the issue of consent as it relates to Indigenous peoples. Afterwards, a non-indigenous scholar asked if he would link his story to the theme of his presentation, described on the conference program as “Human Agency, Treaty and Political Theories of Consent.”

This request was challenged by a young indigenous scholar who asked non-indigenous conference participants to think about it from her cultural perspective. For her, the story did not need explaining. Rather it was up to the listener to reflect on its meaning and relevance for his/her own life, thereby learning what lessons the story and the storyteller offer.

She reminded the audience that at the conference dinner held the night before, we had talked about whether or not it is possible to have an intercultural dialogue. One way of doing this she said, is to engage the story and the storyteller respectfully.

Her comments led to an intense dialogue about the differences between indigenous and non-indigenous ways of listening and learning and about the pervasive nature of colonialism. As the discussion continued, it seemed to me that the reluctance or inability of the non-indigenous audience to ‘hear’ John Borrows’ story revealed a deeper chasm, one that I have seen before.

It is the gap between what we (as non-indigenous people) think we are doing- which is engaging with good intentions in an intercultural dialogue, and how Indigenous peoples experience that same event as a manifestation of deeply ingrained institutional colonialism and attitudes.

In these situations what we are really doing, whether unconsciously or not, is asking Indigenous peoples to fit within our cultural paradigm- to have the intercultural dialogue on our terms, not theirs. And when this is pointed out to us we get uncomfortable. Another non-indigenous conference participant probably spoke for many in the audience when he said that “the discourse about colonialism was disquieting” for him as a non-indigenous person.

And he posed the provocative question, “can we only engage in dialogue as enemies?” –giving voice to a sense of frustration and unease that characterizes many such exchanges between the indigenous and non-indigenous in a variety of venues.

Nor could we take comfort in the closing remarks made by the final conference panel. James Tully said that John Borrows’ story is a way of saying that “we need to learn to listen differently,” and that “we need to shake free from the sediment of colonial history to listen to why First Nations resist.”

Taiaiake Alfred summed it up by saying that “there needs to be struggle in order to lay out a path to co-existence, and that the process of being uncomfortable is essential for non-indigenous people to move from being enemy to adversary to ally.”

Around the same time as the conference, I was also reading two indigenous works –the first written in 1974 by George Manuel, Secwepemc chief from the interior of British Columbia, indigenous activist and political visionary whose work on behalf of Indigenous peoples spanned the globe. The second, an excerpt from Taiaiake Alfred’s forthcoming book, *Wasase*. George Manuel said:

When we come to a new fork in an old road we continue to follow the route with which we are familiar, even though wholly different, even better avenues might open up before us. The failure to heed (the) plea for a new approach to Indian-European relations is a failure of imagination. The greatest barrier to recognition of aboriginal rights does not lie with the courts, the law, or even the present administration. Such recognition necessitates the re-evaluation of assumptions, both about Canada and its history and about Indian people and our culture-...Real recognition of our presence and humanity would require a genuine reconsideration of so many people’s role in North American society that it would amount to a genuine leap of imagination.

It struck me that thirty-one years later, most ordinary Canadians have yet to take this ‘genuine leap of imagination’ to question more deeply our assumptions- our myths- about Canada’s past, or to understand how they influence our relationship with Indigenous peoples today with regard to historical conflicts, reconciliation and peacemaking.

George Manuel identified the root of the problem-our persistence in clinging to the old colonial myths that keep us in a state of denial. Myths that inhibit our ability to imagine something different. But he also saw a way forward – a new path that would lead to a more peaceful co-existence between us.

A path that should we choose it, requires us to think more deeply about what it would mean to fully recognize and respect the ‘presence and humanity’ of the Indigenous peoples whose lands we now share.

In 1974, Manuel was a rare combination of visionary and grass roots pragmatist who saw clearly that the work of decolonization cannot rest on the backs of Indigenous peoples alone. He knew that Canadians have a different, yet critical role to play on this front - one that we must figure out for ourselves.

In 2005, Taiaiake Alfred sets out an empowering vision for Indigenous peoples to move along a “new warriors’ path” to freedom and peace through personal and political transformation that is grounded, not just in words, but in the decolonizing choices and actions of everyday life.

This way of being in the world is not constrained by what he calls the “politics of pity, such as self-government processes, land claims agreements, and aboriginal-rights court cases.” Rather it is contingent upon working outside these parameters in order to achieve real freedom from the destructive legacies of colonialism.

A freedom that is rooted in indigenous spiritual, cultural and philosophical values. In this way, he says, Indigenous peoples will create a new ethical and political vision on a path to peace, within themselves, their communities and nations, and potentially with us.

In setting forth his strategic vision, Alfred also calls upon non-indigenous people who would be allies - those “who are capable of listening...to share our vision of respect and peaceful coexistence...(and to) creatively confront the social and spiritual forces that are preventing us from overcoming the divisive and painful legacies of our shared history as imperial subjects.”

Creative confrontation or non-violent conflict is an inevitable part of this process, he says, but it will be “conflict for a positive purpose” to help us restore relations between us based on “re-establishing respect for the original covenants and ancient treaties that reflect the founding principles of our relationship.”

Ultimately, Alfred suggests that this can only be achieved through a decolonizing struggle on both sides. Our respective paths in this struggle are different, but the goal is the same - transforming the social and political landscape to enable us to co-exist peacefully.

Simply put, the task before us is to transcend the old colonial roles and imperial mindsets that keep us trapped in a relationship defined by the historical dichotomies of oppressor/oppressed and perpetrator/victim. At the same time, we must create a positive political vision by transforming or re-imagining our relationship, drawing on the principles and practices of old intercultural treaty diplomacy.

From this perspective, I see history as a paradox we work within. It is both a colonial spectre that haunts us and a decolonizing spirit that frees us.

Reflecting on the conference dialogue and the challenges put forward by Manuel and Alfred, I began to think about how Canadians generally do not see that we are stuck in a colonial paradigm in which “history has become a crucial field for political struggle,” one that continues to play out in various contexts- at academic conferences, in classrooms, at negotiating tables, in the media, and in courts and corporate boardrooms across the country.

If we think about decolonization and history at all, it is not in relation to ourselves. Rather we say that Indigenous peoples must decolonize-to “get over the past”- by which we mean that they must ‘heal’ the impacts of colonialism upon themselves in a process of nation-building that is ultimately defined by dominant culture values and priorities.

To get ‘unstuck’ the non-indigenous - not just in government and legal circles, but more broadly as a society - must focus not, as we have done so often with disastrous results, on the problem of the “other” (that is, Indigenous peoples) but turn our gaze, mirror-like, back upon ourselves, to what Roger Epp calls the “settler problem.” In essence, we must begin to take a more proactive responsibility for decolonizing ourselves.

I am curious as to how these themes of imagination, history and myth, struggle and transformation, might suggest new ways for the non-indigenous to take up our role and responsibility in the work of decolonization. I also found myself thinking about my own experiences of being uncomfortable, working as a non-indigenous woman within indigenous contexts over the years. I realized that my own deepest learning has always come from those times when I was in unfamiliar territory-culturally, intellectually and emotionally.

It seems to me that there is power in this place of ‘not knowing’ that may hold a key to decolonization for non-indigenous people. As members of the dominant culture, we have to be willing to be uncomfortable, to be disquieted at a deep and disturbing level - and to understand our own history, if we are to transform our colonial relationship with Indigenous peoples.

For it is in this space of “not knowing” and working through our own discomfort that we are most open to deep, transformative learning. The kind of experiential learning that engages our whole being – head, heart and spirit.

I began to look for a theoretical and practical approach to non-indigenous decolonization – a process of struggle that I call “unsettling the settler within”- that would move us from unconsciousness, racism, denial, and guilt about our history to critical inquiry, reflection and social action, using history as a catalyst for change. I turned to a multidisciplinary literature on transformation to explore these themes:

Transformative scholar Edmund O’Sullivan tells us that transformative learning involves “experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in world.”

Transformative theory suggests that we do not learn solely or even primarily through reason or rationale, but also through our emotions, physical body, spiritual presence and imagination.

Thus learning involves ‘multiple intelligences’ that we use both consciously and unconsciously in ways that sometimes ‘disquiet’ or unsettle us. A major theme in the literature focuses on the need to look beyond western Eurocentric cultural values that privilege learning discourses steeped in scientific reason, rationality and objectivity over those of emotionality, spirituality, intuitive knowing and subjectivity.

Transformative scholars Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas argue for a “pedagogy of discomfort” – the need to move outside our comfort zones in order to critically reflect on our emotional reactions to “discomforting truths.” In this way, they say, we are better able to “identify unconscious privileges as well as invisible ways in which one complies with dominant ideology.”

Philosopher Mary Warnock links our capacity to imagine with our ability to use both our intellect and our emotions. J. Edward Chamberlin builds on this insight to point out that we do this most effectively through stories and storytelling. He says that it is the “strangeness” of myths and stories from other cultures and our own that shape our worldviews. In fact, he argues that “the strangeness is crucial” because it is the power of “not knowing” that ignites our imagination, moving us in ways we do not fully comprehend.

Historians who study the links between historical consciousness and public history look at how western democracies attempt to come to terms with our colonial past, dealing with issues of denial, racism, and guilt. They view the capacity to rethink history using critical reflection and social action as key to social transformation.

They ask if it is possible through public deliberative dialogue about our conflicting histories, to negotiate a shared history based not on a false consensus, but on a recognition of difference that moves us beyond our dichotomous past.

These transformative works give us important clues as to why George Manuel's insight into our 'failure of imagination' coupled with Taiaiake Alfred's observation that the non-indigenous need to be made uncomfortable and James Tully's call for us to shake free from our colonial history, are critical to our thinking about how to transform Indigenous-Settler relations.

They help to explain why John Borrows' story evoked such a powerful response, both from the young indigenous scholar who insisted on its' legitimacy and from the non-indigenous scholar who was 'disquieted' or 'unsettled' by its 'strangeness' in an academic forum that privileges western ways of knowing.

They remind us that learning is not 'all in our heads' and that stories engage our whole being in ways that push us to question the very epistemological and pedagogical lenses through which we view the world and our relationship with Indigenous peoples.

As non-indigenous people, we must find our own ways to make sure that we do not walk right by the 'new fork' and continue blindly down the same old road we have traveled with Indigenous peoples. Because it is time for Canadians as a society to shake ourselves from the complacency that comes with dominant culture power and privilege. To think about who we have been in order to imagine who we might become at home and in the global community of the 21st century.

To take a path that enables us to maintain hope in the face of despair. Not a utopian path that glosses over the very real and substantive damage that has been done in our name, but a path that reveals the ‘beauty that exists in hard places’ if we learn to look and listen differently.

We must face our history honestly and with courage in ways that transform not just our minds but our hearts and our spirits. Challenging our assumptions, exploring our myths about our shared history is the first step towards engaging in a deeper transformative dialogue with Indigenous peoples about what really constitutes a just reconciliation and how we might work towards an ethical peace.

The promise of working within a transformative framework is that our dialogue about history – our stories and our myths – beckons us not just to understand our paradoxical past, but to finally take that “genuine leap of imagination” to guide our steps today and into the future. Although the way is not clear and there will be struggle – the “new fork in an old road” is a powerful place of transformation if we are willing to take it. George Manuel knew this in 1974. Taiaiake Alfred, thirty-one years later, invites us again to choose this path. And they are right. We cannot leave this critical task up to governments and the courts. In reality, institutions do not lead social change. The people do. And so it is up to us.