

SPOTLIGHT ON UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIP

Healing Relations Through the Land

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Prologue: Gap of Understanding

Almost a year ago, I was pondering the task of bridging the rift of understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. The media is rife with many negative stereotypes of Indigenous people that seem not only to permeate Canadian culture but also to seep into the conscious and unconscious minds of young people. Sometimes these derogatory ideas are reinforced by family members or other important adults in their lives. In the hallways at the school where I worked as an educational assistant I would overhear comments such as “Most Indians have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome” or “Indians have lots of kids so they can collect more welfare money.” One student even tried to convince me that the bid of Peguis First Nation to buy the abandoned Kapyong Barracks for an urban reserve was merely a land grab. He truly believed that an urban reserve would ruin Winnipeg by providing an opening for all manner of immoral and criminal behaviour. If he had done a little research, he would have understood that the claim by Peguis First Nation is legal under the treaty land entitlement process and that urban reserves bring increased economic health to a city, not more crime (“Meeting,” 2015). But what shocked me the most is that he did not feel compelled to back up his opinions; he just assumed he was correct. His stereotypical view of Indigenous people was influencing not only his identity but also that of the Indigenous individuals around him.

This distressing conversation made me realize how wide the chasm of misunderstanding can be between the two people groups, in addition to the absolute need to find a way to break down the continuing effects of colonialism on Indigenous youth. I strive to find a means by which to close the national, and personal, relationship divide. I realize that a factor of commonality could be found in the natural world. As a young girl, I would lie for hours in the tall grass outside my home, listening to the wind as it blew the stalks around me like ocean waves. I would watch the ants busily hauling food back to the hill or thrill to discover a nest of squirming, bald, baby field mice. If I, as a non-Indigenous person, have these wonderful interactions with nature, maybe everyone else has them at some point too. The idea is also timely because growing environmental issues are concerning people of all cultures. If Indigenous beliefs about nature and the Earth could be understood by non-Indigenous people, perhaps some healing can begin.

Indigenous culture has an enduring relationship with the land and everything above, below, and on it. This is why living in a certain place is so important. Indigenous belief systems include the concept of relationality, not only with other humans but with non-human entities as well. These beings include animals, plants, rocks, water, and spirits. There is no hierarchy of power within these relationships. Humans are not the “top of the food chain” who can utilize the Earth’s resources at will. As with any relationship, there are rights and responsibilities involved. It is necessary to show respect for all entities. This explains why Indigenous leaders did not understand the concept of possessing land when the settlers came. They could no more imagine owning a piece of the Earth than owning another human being. Over-fishing or hunting to extinction would have been extremely disrespectful and thus not done. Author and botanist Kimmerer (2013) explained this concept simply and beautifully by relating the example of a bowl, a spoon, and some berries to represent the generosity of the Earth in providing sustenance for humans and other living things. The bowl is not bottomless – there is a finite amount. Kimmerer explained that the “gifts multiply by our care for them and dwindle from our neglect. We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility to sustain

those who sustain us” (p. 382). This is a concept that until very recently had not be embraced by the majority of non-Indigenous scientists or businesspeople. However, the respectful, conservationist theories are now commonly viewed as being valid.

Indelible Connection

Indigenous knowledge is inseparable from the land where Indigenous peoples live. As a Dien (Navajo) woman, Alice Benally expressed the Indigenous connection to the land during a lawsuit to try to prevent the forcible relocation of her people (Whitt, 2009). She said that at a different location, they would not know the significance of the mountains, the life forms, or the sacred places and that the land would not know them – their way of life could not continue. Many Indigenous languages do not even include a term for relocation because the concept is unthinkable. The people would cease to exist if moved elsewhere (Whitt, 2009). Forced relocation creates damage far beyond what a non-Indigenous person can imagine. Because of the numerous relationships affected, the damage to individuals and their communities is multifaceted. They experience trauma in the physical, spiritual, and psychological realm. In traditional justice, banishment was the severest form of punishment that could be meted out. It was rarely imposed and was considered worse than a death sentence because of the broad scope of its effect (Whitt, 2009). This truth could explain some of the difficulties faced by Canadian Indigenous people today who are attempting to heal from the effects of colonization through the land claim process. Reclaiming particular spaces facilitates holistic healing practices that require sacred spaces and particular herbal medicines to promote health and wellness.

The plants that can be used for medicine are found in certain areas. Therefore, access to these places is vital to the health of the Indigenous community. The cedar tree is used for medicine by the people of the coastal Pacific Northwest (Kimmerer, 2013). From the roots to the foliage, every part of the cedar is used for a particular type of healing. The effects of over-forestation would be devastating. James Lamouche, a research officer with the National Aboriginal Health Organization, found that “Indigenous access and control over land is central to Indigenous knowledge and the protection and use of Indigenous healing methodologies” (as cited in Robbins & Dewar, 2011, p. 12). Lamouche postulated that the break with the land is the most significant factor in health problems among Indigenous people. It is contradictory to expect a nation to heal itself while simultaneously being separated from its source of medicine.

Where an Indigenous community lives is important for many other reasons as well as healing. Climate and weather are interpreted and compared to intergenerational stories, in order to document important changes. Hunting and trapping routes are established by following the animals as they migrate. Landmarks are used by mentors to illustrate invaluable moral lessons to their students. The Lakota have a story about how a grandfather taught his grandson about the difference between knowledge and wisdom by use of a gully near the end of winter. The grandfather had known that the boy would attempt to cross the gully instead of going around it, even though the snow was too soft to support him. He knew this because as a young child, he had attempted to make the same crossing and failed (Marshall, 2001). This particular gully was known by many generations of the family and served as a teaching tool because of the accumulated knowledge of weather, snow, water . . . and the impatience of little boys. Thus, the morals and values of the culture are kept strong by stories that involve contact with the land.

Western Disconnect

Another complication is how Westerners view Indigenous knowledge. It is rarely written down and must be transmitted, or handed over, orally only when the student is ready. If it is given too early or too late, the person does not benefit in the same way and may even use the knowledge in an unethical manner. Thus, the knowledge is held and passed on verbally at the discretion of the teacher and in consideration of the individual student’s maturity (Whitt, 2009).

Because Indigenous knowledge was not documented, Western scientists did not consider it valid. They dismissed the stories as myths and fairy tales instead of useful facts. The difference can be explained by how the two cultures approach nature and science. The Western way is empirical and representational, while the Indigenous way is experiential and presentational (Whitt, 2009). Oral history is valued in Indigenous knowledge but rejected in Western science as unsophisticated and undefined. Western science perceives time as uniform, flowing in a linear direction from past to present to future, but Indigenous ways of knowing do not. In Indigenous knowledge, everything is not made up of particles that obey unchanging, universal laws, but science has strict particle theory (Simpson, 2002). Philosophical differences aside, the oral culture made sense to transitory peoples who would have had difficulty carrying books around with them as they moved. The format of the stories as legends also makes sense, because this is one of the most easily remembered forms. There is a parallel to Shakespeare's rhyming iambic pentameter, which made memorization easier for the actors who had no script copies. Regardless of the fact that skilled communicators are valued in almost any culture, the Western dismissal of oral ways of knowing has bred a detrimental attitude toward Indigenous people.

Western practices have contributed to a sick planet. Pollution, ecosystem destruction, ozone depletion, and species extinction are all results of man's intervention into nature's ways. Science is starting to turn to Indigenous ways of knowing to solve the problems and to provide alternative ways to interact with the planet. Inuit journalist and past president of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, John Amagoalik (1992), eloquently described the Inuit understanding of life on Earth as their understanding "that to waste now means to want later. We know that there must be a balance between take and return" (p. 65). Amagoalik also revealed that Westerners are beginning to understand and appreciate Indigenous knowledge. Amagoalik claimed that respecting the environment, sustainable development, and conservation are ideals that mainstream culture has borrowed from the Inuit people. This reciprocal relationship runs counterintuitive to the Western concept of using up natural resources on the whim of humanity. Shopping for locally produced goods, organic products, and the recycling craze are just a few examples of steps in the right direction when it comes to the environment. There is also a relatively recent acknowledgement of the value of Indigenous knowing in the health industry. A large percentage of pharmaceuticals are based on traditional medicinal plants (Whitt, 2009). Herbal remedies are more popular than ever and meditation practices are increasing. The medical system is beginning to expose all cultures to Indigenous knowledge of the land.

Hopeful Future in the Public Education System

Public education is also starting to redefine our approaches to teaching and learning to be similar to Indigenous models. Individualized learning is becoming valued over the "one size fits all" factory model. Discovery, or inquiry learning, is being recognized as producing creative and critical thinkers. Teachers are acting more as guides and less as all-knowing authoritarians in the classroom. Indigenous content is being added to curriculum. For example, the Brandon University library is in the process of adding the Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives Collection of books, games, and other items into circulation in its main collection. These items are cross-curricular and are intended for use in courses such as English language arts and social studies, not just Aboriginal studies electives. Classroom exposure to Indigenous beliefs and ways of interacting with the land tends to lend credence to the information for non-Indigenous youth.

One of the effects of these changes is an increased positive identity for Indigenous young people. If they can see evidence that their culture is no longer denigrated but valued, school and education will become more meaningful. Simpson (2002) recommended that more Indigenous teachers be hired to provide positive role models for Indigenous youth. She also encouraged science curriculums to acknowledge both Western and Indigenous methods of experimentation, with engineering, technologies, and mathematics as viable options. These changes offer hope for the future and the real possibility of healing the community. Increased confidence growing in

Indigenous youth will enable them to respond to negative comments in a more productive way. Non-Indigenous students will be exposed to all of the positive information about Indigenous culture at the same time as Indigenous youth, and that exposure is bound to bring about more respect for alternative ways of knowing and for the individuals who hold those beliefs.

Conclusion: The Possibility of Positive Intersections

The question remains, will any of these suggestions really provide a means of healing for individual identities and of caring for Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships in today's youth? Colonial attitudes may be too ingrained in some people for their opinions to change. However, those who farm with their parents may be open to a better understanding. Family farms are passed down from generation to generation, and they have an undeniable appreciation and connection to the land. To be a successful farmer, one must have intimate knowledge of the weather patterns, soil mineral content, water table, and so much more. Budding scientists, environmental activists, and story tellers may also find value in traditional teachings. Perhaps a chord of recognition will be struck once the Indigenous ways of knowing are more thoroughly understood. Some Indigenous youth have turned away from their heritage. Others are so angry and filled with pain because of the inter-generational effects of colonization that they are not yet ready to mend fences with the non-Indigenous community. Nevertheless, individuals on both sides of the chasm are bound to reconsider their positions . . . and they will affect a few more. I believe that any chance is better than no chance and that the only true failure is not to try.

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About the Author

Diane Brown is currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Education After Degree program, senior years stream, with English and Native Studies as teachable subject areas. Diane pursues inquiry learning as a lifestyle and is enthusiastically committed to guiding others on their journeys of educational discovery in the future.