

A Fair Country?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Unitarian Church of Vancouver

Upon immigrating to this country in 2002 with work visa in hand, members of this congregation generously supplied me with books of Canadian history, social science and arts and culture in order to help me get my bearings in a new country. As well, just to be sure, in case I neither had time nor sufficient wit, I was presented with a copy of Will and Ian Ferguson's *How to be a Canadian*, where I learned invaluable information in chapters with titles like: "Canada: A Rich Tapestry (or Who to Hate and Why)," "How to Waste Time Like a Canadian," and "Twelve Steps to Say 'I'm Sorry': or How to Be a Canadian in the Worst Way." All of those books have served me well in one way or another. And from the Ferguson brothers—think of it!: coming from the States, where the by-line of a Sixties best seller told Americans that "love is never having to say you're sorry," I found out from the Fergusons that to be a Canadian, you have to know how to say "I'm *sorry*" in a dozen different ways, do it all the time, and in every conceivable social context.

Truly, crossing borders, taking up residence, and getting oriented in a foreign country you want to make your own can be a daunting task in the best of circumstances. Fortunately, you welcomed us, offered insiders' advice on myriad aspects of how to understand and navigate our new city, province and the country we would come to swear allegiance to and embrace in six years time as citizens. You took pains to amicably point out to me, as an outsider, the not-always clear distinctions between the US on the one hand, and ethos and history of Canada on the other.

As well, I remember your expressions of justifiable pride in "*your home and native land*": its enviable progress toward nationhood without the scourge of revolution and war; its

official commitment to multiculturalism; its welcome to a quarter of a million immigrants every year; its recent history of providing peacekeepers in areas plagued by vicious conflict; its momentous embrace of same-sex marriage backed up by law and grounded in our Charter Rights. Within months of my arrival, I witnessed first-hand the moving experience of Canada as a distinct, independent nation when its government listened to its citizens and refused to be pressured to join in the invasion of Iraq. Personally, and again within months of arriving here, I also experienced Canada's single payer national health system—so different from that in the States—and, on that occasion, received excellent care.

All this, and more, justifiably evokes “true patriot love.”

In these nearly eight years, and on my journey from brand new immigrant to recently minted citizen, I have also observed a nation and its people continually, almost obsessively, in search for itself and its identity. How could it be otherwise in a country with such a multifarious population, complex cultural, linguistic and historical roots, and living immediately adjacent to a massive nation-state convulsively gripped by a fever dream of empire?

But emerging up through the complexity and our relations with the States, I believe, is a picture that Canadians have a fairly solid sense of themselves, their desires as a people, and their intent for this nation. When people are asked and listened to, they're pretty clear that they think that this nation is about *fairness, inclusivity, and effectiveness*. They express with some confidence what kind of education system they want, what kind of health care, what minimum standards of living and housing, what approach to justice, what kind of environmental responsibility. We pay keen attention to and value egalitarianism, the maintenance of a balance between individuals and groups, the perception and practice of Canada as a non-monolithic,

complex society—a nation dedicated to balancing competing rights, identities, responsibilities and obligations—through on-going negotiations in all domains of private and public life.

If a people knows and yearns to express these kinds of values, these shared aspirations of social and physical well-being, these shared rules of behavior—then they have a reasonably good grasp on the way they want to live together, and what sort of country they want their nation to

be. **But contrast these values, aspirations and rules of behaviours with the following:**

- a government that signs, but then takes no steps to implement the Kyoto Accords on climate change;
- a government that negotiates and signs the historic Kelowna Agreement with First Nations in 2005, and then ignores and fails to fund it;
- a government which rejected the call of the Assembly of First Nations and voted “no” to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a decision that clapped us alone in the company of only three nations—the US, New Zealand and Australia (which has since signed the Declaration)
- a nation’s security agency that agrees to ship off a citizen to face certain torture in a foreign country;
- a nation’s national police force that leaks misleading classified information that contributes to throwing a federal election that then brought the Conservative party into power;
- a nation committed to its independence yet saddled—and how did this come about?—saddled with the easiest foreign takeover rules of domestically owned companies in the world;
- a nation whose government, in a travesty of democracy, shuts down Parliament two years in a row to hold on to power, thwart the will of the people, and avoid accountability;
- a nation, alone among all developed countries, without a national housing program while 300,000 Canadians are homeless, 3 million suffer from core housing needs, and its mayors—ten years ago—announced that we have a national housing crisis;
- a country without a food stamp program while ¾ of million people have become dependent on food banks and five million citizens try to survive below the poverty line.

We know that each of us could contribute more outrages to this list. We know as well, that reality is complicated; there are more than two sides to each item in this catalogue of woes; and that, perhaps, I am not being fair. *Still, yet, even so:* when I consider, on the one hand, what we say about ourselves and what we desire as a people, when we say that we think that this nation, above all, should be about *fairness, inclusivity and effectiveness*; when I contrast this—fairness, inclusivity and effectiveness—the very things I have come to learn, value, and respect about my new home-land—when I compare this with how far our governments, our police and security forces, our business elites and media—how far they fall short of embodying these values and aspirations, and even turn away from them in wanton disregard or cynical contempt, and *we* seem so distracted, powerless, and resigned—*then*, how true former Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow’s words seem to me when he recently called Canada “a nation half built.”

How can I begin to make sense of this disjunction, this mis-match between what we say about ourselves, and about what goes on, in fact, “*out there*”? I’ve got to get some kind of handle on this, some purchase on our story, our principles, our history, and a compelling framework to interpret them or I am going to go “over the bend.” Either this country is going to remain obscure and forbiddingly *foreign* to me, when I want so much to feel at home; or somehow, someone will step forward to help us diagnose and describe this disjunction between ideals and values held by most Canadians as true of us, how it arose, how it is perpetuated, and how, by “telling truths about Canada” and its story, we can begin the task of re-building this half built *house* so that it will truly be a fair, inclusive and effective *home* for all of Canada’s peoples.

Last May I travelled to Thunder Bay to attend the Annual Meetings and Conference of the Canadian Unitarian Council. For reading on the plane and during breaks in the conference, I took along with me a copy of the recently published book called *A Fair Country: Telling Truths*

about Canada, written by John Ralston Saul, one of this nation's most prominent public intellectuals. I remember clearly, how with growing excitement, first on the plane ride and then in my creek side dorm room at Lakehead University, I read Saul's provocative thesis about Canadian foundational identity, the root causes into what he sees as a profound and dangerous malaise in our political, social, economic and cultural life, and the surprising evidence he brings forward to drive his argument home. It didn't take me long to conclude, as an immigrant, a new citizen, and as a minister, serving this congregation and the Unitarian movement in this country, that *A Fair Country...* was the most important book I had read about Canada.

In sum, according to Saul, Canada is not primarily a "European" nation created in the image and values inherited from France and Great Britain. Instead, he asserts that we are a Metis nation; that our most basic values, ideas, and institutions are based and influenced by the original and on-going encounter between French and English speaking immigrants and the First Nations and Inuit peoples. Indeed, Saul claims we are more aboriginal than we are European, and that our failure to come to terms with this formative, foundational reality—stretching back more than 200 years before Confederation and continuing to this day—failing to understand and coming to terms with it prevents Canada from being the self-confident and progressive nation that it could and should be. As a result, we misrepresent ourselves to ourselves; we're caught telling the wrong story about ourselves: we don't know who we really are. And this fact about us has dire consequences: a dysfunctional political, business and cultural elite, an uncertain, frustrated citizenry seriously adrift, and a nation plagued by poisonous, tragic relations between European and recent immigrants and our First Nations peoples.

"We are a people of Aboriginal inspiration," Saul writes, "organized around a concept of *peace, fairness and good government*. That is what lies at the heart of our story, at the heart of

Canadian mythology, whether francophone or Anglophone. Indigenous peoples are already there, at the core of our civilization. That is our reality. Our challenge is to learn how to recognize what we have trained ourselves not to see.”

Now I have to admit, that my excitement in reading Saul’s provocative thesis was mixed with a sinking feeling of dread: Oh no, here comes another exercise in cultural misappropriation. A white guy compares the poverty of his own culture with the exotic wealth and foreign allure of someone else’s and then, willy nilly, ransacks the stranger’s house in order to redecorate his own ideas, speech and décor. This happens all the time in post-Christian, secularizing Western cultures, and is the reason why so much New Age thought and practice, so many East—West encounters make me wince and leave me cold; this is also the reason why I have been extremely cautious, and not a little confused about how I can approach and engage with First Nations people honestly, authentically, and productively.

But I think Saul’s book is different, and page-by-page, cumulatively, it won me over. First of all, he seems to have really listened to myriad First Nations and Inuit people, cites them by name, and faithfully re-presents their outlook, individuality, pain, insight, power, and potential; not as victims, not as our problem, not as forever “The Other,” but as co-equal, co-creators of this land, and essential partners in helping to secure its well-being now and in the future. Second, Saul brings forward fascinating, compelling evidence from Canada’s past to back up his thesis that the foundation of who we are is planted in the Aboriginal tradition of eating from “a common bowl” and of a culture based on the idea of an ever-expanding, “inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join us.” And finally, as a business and political insider, Saul’s trenchant examination and critique of his own class, of the way it is enthralled and inhabited by a colonial mindset, a “denial of the reality of self in favour

of an imaginary special position inside the mythology of someone else's empire," which Saul claims with good reason, is the "dominant intellectual current in common use in Canada," I felt that this insider's self-critique carried a lot of weight.

But as an outsider, someone for whom Canada's history and experience is not second nature, I didn't feel that I could trust my own judgment and reading and so last Autumn I read the book again with a large group of UCV members in a six-session Adult RE class, and secured the commitment of UU ministers across Canada to read the book and discuss it in our regional and national meetings this year.

Any attempt to "tell truths" about Canada is bound to be controversial, and so it proved to be in our Adult RE class. Saul was faulted for a shaky interpretation of important judicial rulings, for romanticizing pre-contact Aboriginal cultures and practice, for his inflammatory polemical style that lacked nuance and painted with very broad, strident brushstrokes, and all of us agreed, that for the sake of clarity, the book could have used some serious editing.

That said; the participants in our ARE class deeply appreciated Saul's recovery and re-evaluation of crucial events and documents in Canada's history which few of us knew or that weren't taught in our schools. We were provoked by his assertion that this nation rests upon and is nourished by three principal sources: francophone, Anglo and First Nations; and that complexity, fairness, inclusiveness, and good government—nourished by on-going, patient negotiation among co-equal partners—is part of our cultural, social and political DNA. We were fascinated by the way he imaginatively linked First Nations principles of "eating from a common bowl" and inclusion within an "ever expanding circle" with the very things we value and perceive as distinctive about Canada: our health system, our commitment to multiculturalism, our creation of the idea of international peacekeepers, and the way we handle the diversity of

immigrants and new citizens, just to name a few. The great disjunction that I've observed and that we all painfully experience between what we value and esteem about this nation and what grieves us—the poverty, the abuse of power, the refusal to be responsible stewards of the environment, among others—this disjunction arises precisely when we abandon our original blessing, our Aboriginal endowment, our Metissage, and instead act like a colonized, insecure people aping theories and practices emanating from London, Paris and Washington DC.

Finally, the members of our Adult RE class were deeply impressed by the fact that First Nations and Inuit peoples are the fastest growing populations in Canada; they have survived contact, disease, mass death, displacement, exclusion, marginalization and residential schools. As well, over some three quarters of Canada's land, Aboriginals are the very Canadians present and established twelve months of the year, every year. They are the physical expression of Canada's sovereignty, and they preside over an enormous extent of Canada's potential mineral and energy wealth. "It's our time," Shawn Atleo, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said recently. "We've arrived at a moment where we have a tremendous opportunity to bring our people together...to get in the room and try and problem-solve together as citizens and First Nations alike." The time, the moment has arrived indeed.

The stories we tell matter. "Stories," Darrell Fasching writes, "have the power to move and affect us into new ways of seeing the world. Unlike purely rational arguments, stories unite reason and emotion so as to move both mind and heart. When they are successful, their power can bring about a conversion in our understanding of ourselves, our world, our destiny. The power of the story reaches down into the unconscious and transforms our ways of seeing and our willingness to act on our new insights."

That is precisely how John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* has impacted me. In this book, Saul is trying to re-tell Canada's story in order to tell truths about us all-too-often obscured, forgotten, denied. It is, in Robert MacDougall's words, "a beautiful book...making an appealing

argument...I would really like to be true.” In the pages of *A Fair Country*, Saul is “engaged in conscious myth-building,” an attempt to “offer a kind of usable past, a national mythology...more invigorating and no less plausible than the one we’ve currently [poorly] stitched together around hockey, Tim Horton’s, and our miscellaneous insecurities. If embracing our mythic Metissage helped us to throw off some of our postcolonial baggage, to know and appreciate our Native communities, and to celebrate rather than lament our penchant for negotiation and compromise,” then this book and Saul’s retelling of our story is worth reading and engaging with intent.

It’s been twenty-five years now since Rev. Mark DeWolfe spoke of his dream that we would appreciate the unique things—the geography, history and peoples—that Canada has to tell us. And of how we might, if we would only listen closely, learn to speak the special language of this place more clearly and to greater effect. The way I see it, thoughtful engagement with Saul’s *A Fair Country* is a good start.

The real work, now, looms before us. I will call on the CUC’s Justice and Equity Monitoring Group to reboot its work and focus on First Nations, with a recommendation that they start by reading Saul’s book. But far more important and closer to home, in the next couple of years, I hope to see the Unitarian Church of Vancouver serve as host site for constructive dialogue and engagement between representatives of First Nations, this congregation and the wider community

Effective, enriching citizenship *and ministry* is contingent, among other things, on knowing and getting right the context in which we live, work, love and aspire. Getting the context right is the reason I am taking this book, its provocative thesis, its critiques and myth making as seriously as I have. To date, it provides the most imaginative, insightful reading of

the disjunction I see and experience in this country between what we value, believe and want to be true of us on the one hand, and the arrogant, wandering failure to achieve them on the other. *A Fair Country* provides a powerful, analytical critique, an old-new story, and an incitement to reclaim our nation and ourselves.

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