

Inconvenient Thoughts

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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In a recent CBC interview, the Mohawk scholar, activist and UVic professor Taiaiake Alfred was asked: “how can average Canadians help to improve relationships between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal peoples?” “The same thing I’d say to the Native kid in foster care,” he said: “educate yourself. Who are you? Who’s your family, your people, your place on the land; situate yourself and don’t ignore history and culture.”

Back in the late 90s, between careers as an academic and Unitarian minister, I was the Program Director of the Utah Humanities Council. One of the sweet parts of my work was travelling around the beautiful landscape of that State and meeting in small towns and cities with local cultural, arts, and history groups. The purpose of the meetings was to introduce the work of the Council and to tell people how they could successfully apply for Humanities grants to help fund local projects, and that I’d be there to help them do it.. Most of the time, I felt a bit like Santa Claus, and my message was warmly received and acted on.

One striking exception to that pattern took place when I met with the Ute Indian Tribal Council in Eastern Utah in a public meeting. I’ll never forget it. I was well launched into my spiel, speaking to the Council members arrayed before me up on the stage, when suddenly one of them banged his hand down on the table and started shouting in the Ute language. Then he pushed himself away from the table and walked off, speaking to himself and the room full of people and to who knows what and who else. Everyone could still hear him raging away off stage; then he returned, sat down abruptly and continued to speak in a language I did not understand; but the high emotions were clear enough.

Council members sat utterly still looking at me. Time and movement and breath stopped, or so it felt. I don't remember what happened immediately after that or what I said, or how the meeting came to an end; no memory at all.

What I do clearly recall is what happened after the meeting adjourned. There I stood dazed and confused in the foyer and preparing to leave when a young Ute who'd been in the meeting walked up to me and said this: "Let me tell you a couple of things—first, when you meet with the Council, if you ever come back here, have someone from the Tribe present on your behalf. And second, don't take what happened in there too personally. That was Floyd Wopsocks who spoke out in there. You see, the traditional summer gathering, hunting and camping grounds of the Wopsocks were in City Creek Canyon and just below it where downtown Salt Lake City is now. You may think that all of this is old history and took place over a hundred and fifty years ago—the Wopsocks getting kicked off their range—but for Floyd and his family, it's like it happened yesterday. He wasn't taking it out on you personally, but on all the people and history you just happen to represent."

There are days when I feel OK about myself; not too toxic, good education, beautiful family and all. And going into that tribal council meeting fifteen years ago, I mean—I'd read Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* and *God Is Red*. I'd taught university seminars where we studied Patricia Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, Robert Utley's biography of Sitting Bull *The Lance and the Shield*, and Gregory Dowd's *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815*. I knew something about Little Bighorn, Wounded Knee and the resistance work in the 70s and 80s of American Indian Movement. I mean, wasn't I a sensitive,

well-educated, left-leaning guy with good intentions? Here's an inconvenient truth: I went into that Council meeting in 1999 tone-deaf, preachy, blind and ignorant as hell.

So hopefully, you can imagine how, having stepped in it royally in my own backyard not-so-long-ago, I was cautious to an extreme moving here back in 2002. I didn't want to blunder blindly about, pontificate, appropriate, tokenize or inadvertently cause offense with regard to First Nations, Canadian history, Native and white relations and the lay of the land in Vancouver—all of which I knew precious little. I received a lot of well-meaning advice on arriving and since then; and soon discovered that it's all very complicated. How could it not be?

The advice—I was getting that from here and books, and in the media; and I got mixed messages about who to turn to in First Nations—scholars, elected tribal officials, best-selling authors, the Assembly of First Nations, traditional tribal elders, women, youth, only those on reserve, off reserve, those involved in the Reconciliation process, those who oppose it as accommodating too much. Fact is: I still don't *really* know how to talk, feel or act without fearing that I'll make a fool of myself or bring disrepute on you. And all the time, here's something I wish I could get as right as I could without incurring unnecessary collateral damage.

So I return to that compassionate young Ute who took me aside and gave me a piece of advice: let someone from the tribe do the talking and don't take the push back too personally—it's not about you necessarily, it's the people and history you just happen to represent.

Taiiaki Alfred, in that CBC interview was also asked: how do we move forward in relationship between aboriginals and non-aboriginals—to which he replied, “My answer is, we don't need to move forward, we need to move back. Because the founding of this country and its principles...recognized the reality that First Nations existed as autonomous communities, and

that they had a homeland and territories. . . . That First Nations are nations in relationship with the other people who are here. And for all the space in this continent, there's enough room for indigenous territories and for the exercise of indigenous cultures and practice by indigenous peoples whose home it was and who've never surrendered it.”

To move forward, we've first got to move back. That assertion helps explain why five years ago I got so worked up reading John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*, why I invited him to speak here, and why a bunch of us read and discussed the book together.

One of the main ideas in the book is that ours is a civilization founded on three pillars: Anglo, French and Aboriginal; and that, in fact, what makes Canada a distinctive nation—a preference for negotiation over violence, an intuitive belief in egalitarianism, a relative comfort with tension between individuals and groups, and the power of diversity and dialogue—the Aboriginal idea of the inclusive circle, that we eat from a common bowl—these come from the Aboriginal roots of our civilization. The pages of that book range across four centuries of treaties, negotiations, and court cases; across a sorry history of colonization, land grabs, and concerted efforts to assimilate, pathologize, marginalize and eradicate those who are the original stewards of this land; peoples with distinct identities and rights. Across four centuries, from the Great Peace of Montreal down to the ruling of the Supreme Court in the Delgamuukw case and beyond, Saul makes a compelling case that we do not know our history, our real history—it's not part of how we describe ourselves. And all of us in that Adult Education class several years ago, most of who were Canadian born and bred, confessed that the history we were reading in Saul's book was unknown to us; this is not what we learned in school or later.

“The single greatest failure of the Canadian experiment, so far,” Saul writes, “has been our inability to...internalize consciously—the First Nations as the *senior* founding pillar of our civilization....In a normalized situation we would find ourselves asking Aboriginals their opinion, their advice on what they think Canada should look like and sound like. To put this in the straightforward language of Jack Sissons, the first judge of the North: “They have much to offer Canada.” The rest of us act as if this is not the case.” (Saul, *A Fair Country...*, 21-2)

And so here we are, Canada Day Weekend 2013—a time for us to connect with family, break bread, head out to beach, the lake, the park and to reckon, with appreciation, if we give it a thought for a moment, the good things of life we enjoy at home, in community, and in this country. And here’s a recommendation: as we set out for summer, a traditional time, as well, for some vacation reading pick up a copy of John Ralston Saul’s book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* and read it—those of us for the first time, and for those who’ve read it already, let’s do it again, and re-discover, Saul writes: “That we are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government. That is what lies at the heart of our story...If we can embrace a language that expresses that story, we will feel a great release. We will discover a remarkable power to act and to do so in such a way that we will feel we are true to ourselves.”

“To embrace a language that expresses that story...”? Second recommendation: a good place to start is to find a copy of Thomas King’s recent book *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* and read it; and thus, as that young Ute guy told me fifteen years ago: “let someone from the tribe do the talking.” After all, isn’t that the first responsibility of someone who would be an ally: that is, to listen to the others’ story? Taiaiake

Alfred told the CBC interviewer, “we need [non-aboriginal] partners, but they are [actually] few and far between.”

King’s book, *The Inconvenient Indian...* is a very personal account, an idiosyncratic historical narrative that takes us back to the fateful encounter between First Nations and Europeans explorers and settlers right down to the present. For the past five decades, he has worked as an activist for Native causes in the US and Canada, taught Native literature and history in both countries, won a slew of prizes and awards, the Order of Canada, and delivered the 2003 Massey Lectures that were published under the title: *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. (Another book you might want to add to the list.) *The Inconvenient Indian* is at turns heart-breaking, hilarious, burnished with anger, analytically razor sharp, and throughout—deeply learned in our North American story.

He takes us through pop culture and film—and I loved and then groaned at this detail: between 1894 and 2010, Hollywood made over 400 movies with Indian people in the frames. “Indian people have been the longest running subject of films out of anyone,” King writes; and then he points out: “there are more cartoon characters—Mickey Mouse...Snow White...Big Bird—and more dogs—Lassie, Rin Tin Tin—etc., who have stars on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame than [there are] Indians” movie stars on the Walk of Fame. (King, 34-41) *The Inconvenient Indian* takes us from there to Alcatraz and Oka, Meech Lake and Elijah Harper, the ever-morphing Orwellian world of the Canada’s Indian Act and the murders of Neil Stonechild, Rodney Naistus and Lawrence Wenger. You’re not going to read about the Plains of Abraham, Vimy Ridge, the Group of Seven, Paul Henderson’s last minute goal, Tommy Douglas or Terry Fox. It’s not that kind of history.

As a professor and teacher of literature, King has a keen eye for mythic narratives and a wry appreciation for clichés and stereotypes. From so many to choose from, here's one example:

North America's paternalistic intervention in the lives of Native people continues unrepentant and unabated. But of course, there's a perfectly good reason for this intervention. [We] Native people can't look after ourselves. We don't have the capacity to manage our own affairs. We haven't the sophistication to understand the workings of the contemporary world and to participate in a modern economy.

You've probably heard these concerns. I know I have. I've been told any number of times that we have to learn to stand on our own two feet and develop skills necessary to manage on our own, without relying on government [handouts].

In the same way that Air Canada, AIG, Bombardier, Halliburton, GM, and the good folks out in the Alberta Tar Sands Project manage on their own, without relying on government [generosities]....So if I've got it right, while North America is reluctant to support the economic "incompetence" of Native people, it is more than willing to throw money at the incompetence of corporations.

And then, King concludes: "Perhaps this is the kind of economic sophistication that North America wants Native people to learn." (King, 124-6)

Two more passages from the book. After a damning analysis of the residential school story, King talks about the 2008 House of Commons public apology, and the words: "we are sorry." King notes "many of the people I talked to had been waiting a very long time to hear those words...Lives were vindicated [by this] public gesture of regret and contrition," and so he says: "Thank you. I really mean it...and yet I can't help but feel that there was something disingenuous" in this gesture.... "Perhaps it was the moment, less than three months after Harper offered Canada's apology, when he stood up at the G20 Summit in Philadelphia and announced to the world that, as Canadians, 'We have no history of colonialism.'"

"Hello," King replies.... "In real life, we expect apologies to be accompanied by a firm purpose of amendment. I'm sorry. It was my fault. I won't do that again. But in the [Canadian] political world, apologies seem to have little to do with responsibilities, and it appears that one

can say “I’m sorry,” and “I’m not responsible,” in the same breath,” and then continue with business as usual.

Business as normal...this brings me to one more passage in the last chapter in King’s book. For over two hundred pages, he took me on a tour of an alternative North America; the one beyond the looking-glass; a world all around me and very real, though frequently unseen and almost always misunderstood. It begins with some questions and a turning of the tables.

“Just what is it that Indians want?” he writes. “Sovereignty? Self-determination? A future? Good jobs? A late-model pick-up truck? I get asked that question all the time. What do Indians want? The good news is that you could choose from any of the above and be right. And you’d be wrong.... Great question. The problem is, it’s the wrong question to ask.” And here came the turning of the tables on this reader.

“There’s a better one to ask. One that will help us to understand the nature of contemporary North American Indian history. A question that we can ask of both the past and the present. *‘What do Whites want?’*... Native history as writ has never really been about Native people. It’s been about Whites and their needs and desires. What Native peoples wanted has never been a vital concern, has never been a political or social priority.... What do Whites want? The answer is simple, and it’s been in plain sight all along. Land. Whites want land.... If you understand nothing else about the history of Indians in North America, you need to understand that the question that really matters is the question of land....

“For non-Natives, land is primarily a commodity, something that has value for what you can take from it or what you can get for it....

For Native peoples, it’s something else altogether, a defining element in Aboriginal culture. “Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of a people. It provides water, shelter and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home.” (King, 215-18)

Reading that, my mind went back fifteen years ago to that Ute Tribal Council meeting and my good intentions. My ignorance. And the dispossession of the Wopsocks from their land

by my ancestors. My people. And the dispossession of the Coast Salish and the Musqueam on whose land these buildings and grounds are located. Has that story ever really been told here?

“How can average Canadians help to improve relationships between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal peoples?” the CBC interviewer asked Taiaiake Alfred. Educate yourself, he said, Renew your dedication to principles of justice in our own backyard—not just Haiti, Somalia and Palestine. Be part of the solution. We need partners in dialogue; they’re few and far between.

Partners? How to go forward and not be paralyzed by liberal guilt and the overwhelmingness of all this? I’m thinking modest, concrete steps. We could start by acknowledging that we meet on traditional Musqueam land, and that it be noted on all of our orders of service. Jen Rasheigh, our Associate DRE has suggested that a First Nations elder be invited to help us plant a medicinal herb garden as a medium for education and connection between our kids, our congregation and the original stewards of this land. It’s my hope that next year Prof. Alfred, and other Native speakers, will be invited to address us from this pulpit, where they could share with us their thoughts about how our congregation could forge meaningful, concrete partnerships. I could use your help in reaching out and making the right kind of connections; I still have so much to learn. And for those of us who may find it hard to make time to read, check out the CBC website *8th Fire*, and listen especially to the Q&A section of the site that features almost thirty on-camera interviews, including those with Thomas King and Taiaiake Alfred. (see <http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/8thfire/>) They only last about 25 minutes a piece—and I think they’re a terrific resource.

A closing story: a number of years ago, my partner Diana was riding her bike under the Burrard Street Bridge and happened upon a crew of Salish men installing the five hundred pound

arms on the Welcoming Man totem facing out on False Creek. She had a camera, and asked them if they wanted her to take some pictures to record the event. They were delighted, saying they hadn't thought of it. It also happened that as she was taking the pictures, a woman came up to her, said she worked at the Vancouver City Archives and would she be willing to give the Archives a copy of the photos—this is a historic event! They would be catalogued, well-cared for and available down the road for anyone to see. Diana sent the CD and copy of photos to the Salish elders. And then with another CD in hand, she went to the Archives and was given some forms to fill out. Turns out, on the forms, it said that she would be signing over exclusive property rights to the Archives. Would the Archives make an exception and share the rights to photos with the Salish Band? And the archivists said no. And so, that piece of Vancouver history is not in the Archives.

The past is not the past; it still haunts and afflicts us. The Salish set up a Welcoming Man totem on land we appropriated and we still demand exclusive ownership.

It's well past time to let someone from the tribe do the talking; and if there's some push back don't take it too personally—it's not about you or me necessarily, it's the people and history we just happen to represent.